The end of discontinuous contracting

Adapted from *The Contractors of Chartres*, chapter XXII.

Permanent workshops at the larger abbeys and cathedrals under the leadership of the best masters is often seen as the most common practice. The evidence for the later middle ages, when there are many documents, is quite compelling. But for the period before the mid-thirteenth century the evidence in the buildings themselves contradicts this view.

Over the past thirty-five years I have not only visited, but obtained the keys for and climbed over thousands of medieval churches in France and England, in Italy and Spain and Germany. Even the quickest toichological survey has shown me that prior to 1250 every one of these buildings, without any significant exception, has been built in many small campaigns. They show that almost every time that arches and vaults were finished and had to be left for the mortar to set, there was a change in contractors.

Obviously, there were circumstances which produced this form of contracting at that time, and there must have been others which discouraged it some time during the thirteenth century and led the industry into the permanent and specialised roles we act out today. We cannot say that just because it is not the way we have been used to seeing things done since the Renaissance it was a less viable way of producing great works of art. We can only say that it was different.

During the period when the buildings themselves show that they were constructed through discontinuous contracting, there is some evidence that has been the subject of much discussion in the hope of unravelling the names of the master masons, these are the labyrinths in Amiens and Reims, both of which commemorate the architects of the buildings they rest in. Both were laid in the last years of the thirteenth century sixty or more years after these two buildings were begun. The information in them may be read in a number of ways, but one shows that there is no conflict between my concept of discontinuous contracting and the post-1250 practice of employing permanent masters.

The one in Amiens was designed by Regnault de Cormant and in it he names two of his predecessors. Historians have naturally assumed that the first, Robert de Luzarches, was also the first architect, but the inscription does not go so far. It reads:

Chil qui maistre yert de l'oeuvre
Maistre Robert estoit nommes
Et de Luzarches surnommes.

This simply translates as "He who was master of the works was Robert from Luzarches". It does not state that Robert was the first master, nor that he began the works, but just that he was the master. When I studied the cathedral, I found evidence for 26 separate campaigns from the ground to the top of the triforium, with the same innumerable changes as at Chartres and elsewhere. So neither Robert nor any other one person could have had control over the bottom two storeys.

The first inscription refers to the bishop and the king who were alive at the time the cathedral was begun in 1220. Does it mentioned them as a substitute for the many itinerant masters whose names had accumulated over the early years of the work? So, should the inscription quoted above be taken to mean "the name of the first master to be permanently engaged by the Chapter was Robert" implying that, up to then as at Chartres, there was no full-time professional supervision?

The inscription names only three architects for the 68 years to 1288, and it is hard to believe that so few men could have controlled a job like this for so long a time. It was one of the largest buildings being constructed in France, and the Chapter would have naturally chosen experienced and proven men for it. While it is true that they could have been appointed in their forties and each of them could have spent twenty-five years on the site, the average working span of senior appointees, as with kings and popes, is a lot less than that. However, if Robert had been appointed towards the middle of the century each master would have been in charge for a more realistic period. Further at Luzarches the little church has a small chapel dating from the 1250's with details very like some in the clerestory at Amiens. If Robert had come from Luzarches in the 50's, the other two masters mentioned in the labyrinth could have completed Robert's work, including the transepts and the laying of the labyrinth itself. We have to conclude that the wording on the labyrinth is not specific enough to show that either interpretation is correct.

The situation at Reims is somewhat similar, though we have been given the names of those masters who were responsible for the most significant parts. There is incontrovertible evidence for at least thirteen campaigns from the floor to the triforium, and considering the depth of the footings there could easily be

another one or two in the foundations. As at Amiens there is nothing in the Reims labyrinth that would contradict this.[1]

One of the four, Jean d'Orbais, is shown with a compass designing the apse, and the inscription reads 'qu'il encommencea la coiffe de l'eglise'. He is the only master whose duration on the site is not mentioned. Jean le Loup is recorded as having worked for sixteen years, Gaucher de Reims who 'ouvra aux vossures et portaulx' for eight, and Bernard de Soissons for an enormous thirty-five. A text of 1287 mentioned Bernard, and if this had been his last year on the site his first would have been 1252.[2]

Subtracting Jean's sixteen years and Gaucher's eight from that takes us back to 1228, at the earliest. This is seventeen years or more after the start of the work. Seventeen years is quite enough to encompass the thirteen-plus campaigns of the *ad hoc* period. Jean's long-term appointment may mark the moment when the old contractual system was being replaced by the new. As with Amiens, my conclusions are the same: there is nothing in either of these inscriptions to contradict the thesis of discontinuous contracting before the mid-thirteenth century.

What, then, were the advantages of a system of discontinuous contracting in the earlier years? It would have grown naturally out of the circumstances. During the eleventh century there were few localities which could have supported large groups of masons for long periods, though I would expect that the larger quarries maintained permanent accommodation for the men who gathered there. Smaller local builders in stone with five or ten skilled men could have been kept constantly at work on farmhouses, chapels, fortifications or repairs, but the monster teams of fifty men or more plus assistants and labourers - which was the size of the team brought from Toulouse to build the eastern end of Compostella in 1077,[3] and the large teams at Chartres - could only have found work on the biggest jobs where the funds were adequate. Over the years the very large jobs would have encouraged some crews to become larger, and then, because they were larger than their own locality could support, they were compelled to look further and further from their home base or quarry in search of work. As the boom developed their ties with their homes were weakened until they became the totally itinerant contractors of 1200. Working quickly and competently they seldom stayed in the one place for more than a year, and this spread their ideas and their inventiveness across a huge area.

I have shown that some of the larger teams from the north-eastern region of the Marne and the Soissonais worked almost exclusively in their own region until the 1190s, and after that were to be found in many other regions as well.[4] The carvers of capitals moved prodigious distances to find work. Some builders specialised in bridges, others in fortifications, and would work with their men wherever they were called, even from the south of France to England for work. Movement was endemic in the period, in pilgrimages and crusades and in emissaries between all the great rulers and church leaders. It was a peripatetic age.

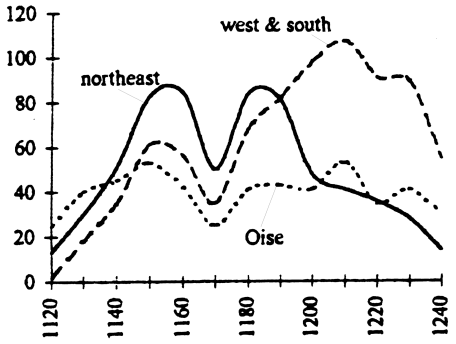
The masters worked as if they were going to be employed on each site forever, even though their experience told them it would be for a few months or, at the most, a year or two. For example, at Lagny the western bays of the choir were built with a door out of the stairs for a walkway that could only have served an extension through the middle of the old westwork that is still there today. At St Pierre in Chartres the western end of the triforium continues into the tower on the same assumption. At Gallardon the windows of the choir were continued behind the older tower in anticipation of being extended to the west through the eleventh-century nave.

One is struck by the confidence of these masters, their assumption that expansion would continue for ever. Even in work which had only recently been completed we find the same restless search for bigness. The master of the nave at Soissons was planning no more than 40 years after the charming south transept had been completed to remove at least the upper storey so it could be raised to the same height as the new work.

It was the same with towers. None of them were capped off during the boom unless they had reached the topmost peak of their spires. in the lantern tower at Laon the staircase continues another ten risers above the roof as if expecting to leap into the next storey before even the one below was finished, feverishly piling even more levels of precarious masonry over the already soaring stones below. Everything was in anticipation of the next move. To stop was unthinkable. One wonders where it would have ended if the boom in building had not petered out.

The economic bust put an end to that glorious dream.

Suddenly, during the 1230s, the amount of building work dried up [next page, top] Compared to the 1190s less than a third was spent.[5] Where did the thousands of unwanted skilled men go? What happened to the sophisticated organisation of contractors? Did they simply down-size, or did they run for cover? It would have been most natural for the teams to reduce the numbers employed, and let the men go back to whatever jobs they could find, or back to the farms and any labouring work available. But what of the most precious and skilled part of the teams – the foremen and clerks, and what of the masters themselves?



The little evidence we have suggests that they looked for security, for some sort of tenure by being employed in a more permanent capacity at the great sites where some work was still going on, such as Reims and Amiens.

Branner wrote that "the fluidity of the 1220's lasted into the next decade", but that afterwards work became regional in character."[6] This is equivalent to writing that before 1230 the masons moved about the countryside spreading their ideas but that afterwards they stopped moving and settled down. Branner goes on to say that inventiveness and experiment, which in architecture is nearly "always a sign of confidence, began to dry up - perhaps firstly in the east where the economic vitality of the Champagne fairs may have been sapped by competition and debts. Reims itself began the retreat from innovation as early as 1225, and over the next decade the north-east in general gradually followed suit."

The Cambridge Economic History asserts that "at the end of the twelfth century and during the first half of the thirteenth, the Champagne fairs were indeed the centre of the international commercial activity of the western world"[7] and were more important than any in Italy or Flanders, but that the middle of the next century this activity had been greatly diminished, the nobility was chronically in debt, municipal revenues "barely sufficed even for normal purposes"[8] and a large proportion of independent husbandmen were being forced to sell out to become rentiers.

The shortage of work would have tempted the masters to settle down to assure themselves of a secure income. The 'diffusion' of the Gothic style into Burgundy, Germany and elsewhere after 1230 may have been as much a consequence of lack of work at home that drove the teams further afield, as it was a conscious choice of the client to use the new Gothic style.

Prior to the great bust, the great buildings of northern France were produced in an organic way. Not being under continuous professional supervision they were more of a process than a project. The buildings read as a continuum of ever-changing direction and methods. Their enormous appeal lies in being like a natural growing thing, for the final appearance is not predetermined in all of its particulars, but only in its basic genetic form.

These buildings are the culmination of an organic evolution that aimed towards the commonly held image of the Heavenly City. They reflect the fascinating individuality of the men who led and worked in the great contracting teams, and the depth of their faith. More than anything, they reflect the creative individuality of the many men who worked on each one.

In one sense it was as if, for a short two hundred years, there was an opportunity for the very best architects to make some contribution to every building, inserting their brilliance into one campaign or another in every site. The alternative in later years was that some sites languished under the control of mediocre men for such long periods that there was little flash of genius in them. I know which contractual system I would prefer, though it makes our job as historians incredibly more difficult.

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1 Salet, "Chronologie", has also suggested that more than one architect is to be found in the early years at Reims. The quotations which follow come from this article.

2 Branner, "Labyrinth of Reims".

3 Harvey, *Gothic World.*.

4 "04 Chartres was lucky".

5 "40 Funding".

6 Branner, *Saint Louis*, 24-9.

7 Miller, *Economic History,* ii 132.

8 Miller, *Economic History,* 533. Kraus, *Mortar*, for the role of Philippe-Auguste's conquests on the financing of churches.