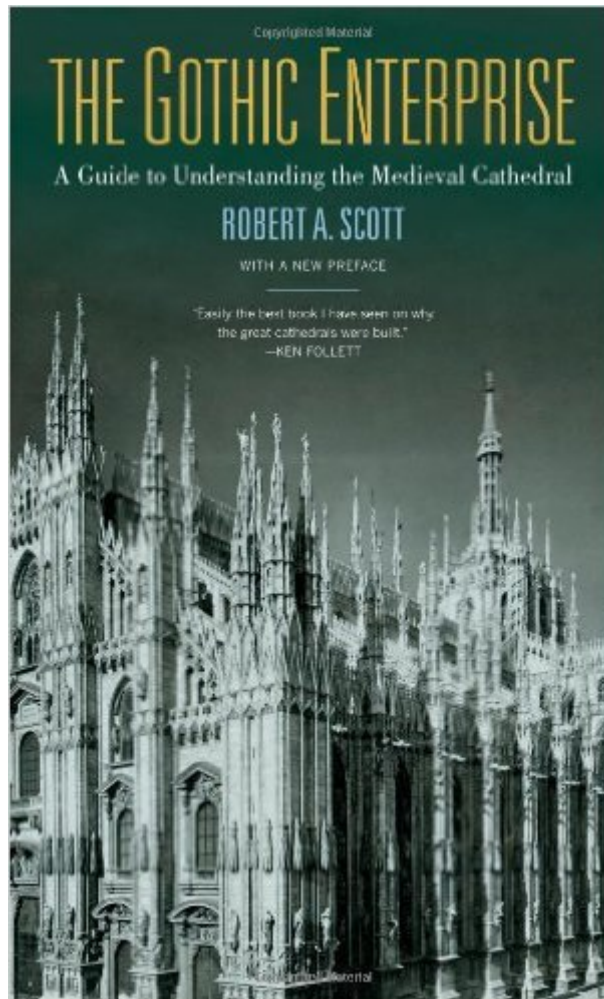


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The Gothic Enterprise: A Guide To Understanding The Medieval Cathedral



Synopsis

The great Gothic cathedrals of Europe are among the most astonishing achievements of Western culture. Evoking feelings of awe and humility, they make us want to understand what inspired the people who had the audacity to build them. This engrossing book surveys an era that has fired the historical imagination for centuries. In it Robert A. Scott explores why medieval people built Gothic cathedrals, how they built them, what conception of the divine lay behind their creation, and how religious and secular leaders used cathedrals for social and political purposes. As a traveler's companion or a rich source of knowledge for the armchair enthusiast, *The Gothic Enterprise* helps us understand how ordinary people managed such tremendous feats of physical and creative energy at a time when technology was rudimentary, famine and disease were rampant, the climate was often harsh, and communal life was unstable and incessantly violent. While most books about Gothic cathedrals focus on a particular building or on the cathedrals of a specific region, *The Gothic Enterprise* considers the idea of the cathedral as a humanly created space. Scott discusses why an impoverished people would commit so many social and personal resources to building something so physically stupendous and what this says about their ideas of the sacred, especially the vital role they ascribed to the divine as a protector against the dangers of everyday life. Scott's narrative offers a wealth of fascinating details concerning daily life during medieval times. The author describes the difficulties master-builders faced in scheduling construction that wouldn't be completed during their own lifetimes, how they managed without adequate numeric systems or paper on which to make detailed drawings, and how climate, natural disasters, wars, variations in the hours of daylight throughout the year, and the celebration of holy days affected the pace and timing of work. Scott also explains such things as the role of relics, the quarrying and transporting of stone, and the incessant conflict cathedral-building projects caused within their communities. Finally, by drawing comparisons between Gothic cathedrals and other monumental building projects, such as Stonehenge, Scott expands our understanding of the human impulses that shape our landscape.

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Customer Reviews

Author Robert Scott had much the same the experience at Salisbury Cathedral as I had - a sense of awe and wonder, and a desire to learn more about it, not just as a place, or as an architectural wonder, or as a place of worship, or as a cultural icon. Scott wanted to get at the heart of the idea of the Gothic enterprise as a whole - a trained sociologist, Scott knew that the bigger picture is sometimes lost by too narrow a focus on particular details to the exclusion of others. The sociology background also gave Scott a sense of wanting to understand the hearts and minds of the people involved. While the principal focus of Scott's travels started with Salisbury Cathedral (in full, the Cathedral Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Salisbury), Scott draws examples from the breadth of the Gothic cathedrals, churches and other buildings. There are literally thousands of such dotted across the European and European-influenced landscapes. Each building has its own unique characteristics, but they share a common spirit. Church building in particular was 'big business' in Christendom for a long time. Scott quotes estimates of that there are nearly 19,000 ecclesiastical buildings in England and Wales, nearly half of which date to the medieval period. The first Gothic church was the Abbey Church of St. Denis, just north of Paris, built under the direction of the 'founding father' of Gothic style, Abbot Suger. Scott's first major section looks at how cathedrals were built, in terms of materials, architectural design, settings, and workforce. With regard to the workforce, the numbers were large and the division of labour highly specialised. In the records of the construction of Westminster Abbey, there were fifteen different categories of workers listed in 1253.

This book is both a wondrous introduction to Gothic Cathedrals for those who are newly curious about them and a concise but thorough resource for those who have long admired and read about the Gothic Cathedral. The author often takes a personal approach in his narrative, which seems quite appropriate given the personal impression these buildings were designed to make (and have made on most who will read this book). The book is both well-researched and easy to read, a

difficult achievement. Its description of the elements of Gothic architecture, for example, is one of the most complete and clear treatments I have read. The broad perspective taken (historical, intellectual, religious, architectural, sociological) helps bring together into one coherent whole the many different faces of the cathedral. Even those who may know the historical and intellectual origins of the cathedral will learn much about its other aspects here. For example, some of the details on construction techniques and parts of the discussion of "sacred spaces" within the cathedral were new even to someone who has read many books on the subject. Medieval intellectual history and its relationship to the cathedrals is explored, and the coexistence of the potentially conflicting reason and faith in a single building is explained. Some discussion of how the cathedrals and their attached schools gave rise to the medieval (and hence the modern) university would have been helpful. Overall, though, the book provides an excellent introduction to the topic and a comprehensive explanation of the "why" and "how" of Gothic Cathedrals (in addition to the more mundane, but still important, "who", "when", and "where").

I would highly recommend Robert A. Scott's new book, *The Gothic Enterprise*. Although many books have been published on the topic of Gothic Cathedrals, Scott has approached his subject with a new perspective. He asks the reader to think as much about the "why" of cathedral building as the "how." The reader will still find lots of information about the practical aspects of cathedral building, most helpfully enhanced by a discussion of the social, political, economic, and even climatological factors that complicated such long and challenging construction projects. But above and beyond this, Scott is interested in the people who conceived, designed, and built these great churches. What motivated them? How did hundreds of people with varying and often conflicting interests work collectively over long periods of time? What did an individual or a community expect in return for their contribution to such a bold undertaking? Scott answers these questions and more. In turn he challenges the reader to see the cathedral in a new light, not only as an example of great architecture, but as tangible evidence of the commitment, creativity, hope, and faith of the people who, against great odds, undertook such a bold and difficult enterprise. Having visited dozens of cathedrals, I think Scott is right on target. A cathedral is more than an amalgamation of stone, timber, and glass. If we look closely, we can still see traces of the contributors: in a mason's mark, the carved face of an 800 year-old effigy, a bishop's ring, or an irreverent carving high in the rooftops. It is the collective presence of these long-dead individuals, as much as the grandeur of the architecture that makes a cathedral so memorable, so tangibly the result of a collective human enterprise.

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