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Alain Erlande-Brandenburg

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The popular image of the traditional western city has usually been dominated by the cathedral, whose sheer size seemed to create an isolated physical and spiritual focal point.

In this iconoclastic study, the author sets out to reverse some of the romantic myths which have accrued about the medieval cathedral, in particular that the cathedral was a separate entity, self-sufficient, sublime and apart. Here the cathedral is shown to be a dynamic, evolving and unpredictable force in the development of the medieval city. Taking France as the main focus, but including material on England, Germany, Italy, Spain and Bohemia, the author describes the growth of diocesan authority and the consequent experiments in the layout of cathedral plans. Full use is made of recent archaeological research to show how architectural, social, financial and religious considerations combined to form a structure that was above all a practical, functioning concern, a 'city within a city'.

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The Cathedral

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Alain Erlande-Brandenburg

TRANSLATED BY

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For Francis Salet

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We shall build so large a cathedral
that those who see it in its finished state will
think that we were mad.

Canon at Sevilla cathedral (1402)

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Maps and plans produced by the Atelier *Etudes et Cartographie* in Lille.

Preface

I obviously ought to try to justify the bold title which I have chosen. In *The cathedral*, a novel published by Huysmans in 1898, the atmosphere of the cathedral of Chartres is suggested, and an attempt is made to evoke the religious life inside the building. My justification is of a different order, and must lie in the course which led me to the drafting of this book. My historical research is concerned with the long term, and I have tried to transcend piecemeal description and thus to achieve a global perspective. What do I mean by long term? Cathedrals were first introduced, in early Christian times, into towns which had recently been reduced to the status of *castrum*. They were then, as they are now, buildings which believers entered with a feeling of veneration. Cathedrals have always resembled living bodies and, in the centuries since they were first established, have been subjected to ceaseless change. In talking of a global perspective, I would emphasise the fact that the cathedral was originally something far larger than the single monument called by that name today. It consisted of a huge complex of buildings: places of worship, which fell in number with the passage of time, the bishop's palace, the canonical precinct, administrative buildings, and the *hôtel-Dieu*. Each of these would subsequently expand, in a manner that demands analysis if we are to grasp the full extent of the 'holy town', an entity which was exclusively concerned with God, and which was inhabited by those who prayed day and night for the living and dead of their diocese. The holy town sprang up within the ancient city, first of all, and then within the medieval town, the latter a flourishing place whose prosperity reflected a rapid rate of demographic growth. The image of the holy town owes much to the existence of the cathedral, which dominated it by its sheer mass, and bestowed a meaning upon it.

PREFACE

The emergence of particular buildings, such as the *hôtel-Dieu* or the canonical precinct, the extension of others, and the construction of the huge Gothic cathedrals, which sometimes measured over one hundred metres in length, cannot be construed in formal terms alone. Indeed, each major transformation was linked to a religious upheaval, for the Middle Ages were no more static than was Antiquity or the modern period. Each epoch established a new order within the holy town.

It has only been possible to address such issues because of the discovery of new sources and the development of a new conception of history. Excavations in urban areas have unearthed fascinating materials whose existence was not even hinted at in written texts. Recent archaeological studies have been concerned with humbler buildings than the cathedral itself, and they have enabled us to appreciate the complexity of the holy town. Current approaches allow us to understand the interaction between the various elements involved, between holy town and town, cathedral and palace, and between canonical precinct and *hôtel-Dieu*.