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TEACHING THE ENGLISHNESS OF ENGLISH GOTHIC CATHEDRAL ARCHITECTURE

Abstract: The present paper has the double aim of describing the role of English cultural studies (and, within that, art historical studies) in training students of English on the one hand and summarizing arguments on the other hand why, among other things, Medieval, especially Gothic, arts should be an important part of the course. Special attention will be paid to Gothic cathedral architecture, which is one of the most outstanding achievements of English arts and culture on the whole, one of those few fields of arts where England was not simply among the best for centuries, but the leading country in Europe for a period.

1 Introduction

For decades the training of students of English in Hungarian higher education has comprised four main fields: literature, linguistics, language practice and methodology. These were the ones which were given priority at the expense of all other possible fields. A fifth area, with usually far less time span, was the one which – separately or condensed into one course – offered information on the history, geography, culture, arts of England, as well as the educational, legal, political, etc institutions of contemporary Britain (and sometimes other English-speaking countries). This was sometimes done within the framework of a single course, but more commonly separated into 'British history' and 'British civilisation'.

The word 'civilisation' has been used in varying senses, and educationalists still have not agreed on a term that would suit its Hungarian or German equivalent best (országismeret, Landeskunde). Very often as much time is spent on British as on American civilisation, although if 'British civilisation' also deals with the historical development of English culture, it should cover at least twice as long a period as its American counterpart. The equal amount of time dedicated to the two countries is made possible only by the fact that most books and courses on British and American civilisation contain mainly the description of the political, educational, legal, economic, etc institutions of contemporary England and

the United States, respectively, dedicating occasionally a chapter to history or, even more rarely, to the arts of these countries. There was, however, no course in the past at most universities and colleges in Hungary that would have covered the development of English culture other than literature.

'Culture' can be understood in various wider or narrower meanings, but neither a wider interpretation of English culture (that would include fields like housing, entertainment, education, hygiene, etc), nor its narrower application for 'high' arts was considered to be a necessary part of the studies of a future teacher of English in the past. Literature has always had an exceptionally prominent role in training students, partly for understandable reasons. Some of these were of a political nature. For a period (some twenty years), the written word was the only way – besides lectures and seminars – of learning the English language in Eastern European countries. There were no travelling opportunities, no satellite TV, not even recorded audio material in the 50s and 60s. The written language had to compensate for the lack of these. Not even written versions of conversational English were used in teaching and learning, but literary works ranging from old English texts to contemporary science fiction were preferred. Right in the first year of our university studies we were expected to read short stories, novels of earlier centuries without being able to distinguish which elements of the vocabulary are still in use today, and which are extinct. Focusing only on one field of culture determined the way of thinking and the preferences of at least one generation. Though I do not deny the general importance of literature as carrier of the language, still, the disproportionate representation of this field of culture at the expense of all the others was and has been clear eversince.

As a result of being trained only in literature and in no other field of culture teachers have usually felt safe eversince only if following the same old track. Someone who has never been trained in visual arts can volunteer to start teaching it only with the help of a lot of autodidactic training and personal interests and motivation in these fields. For decades only a few exceptional personalities at universities were known to discuss also the music, fine arts, architecture, theatre, etc of the age whose literature they were lecturing on.

It is only for a decade or so that more and more tentative steps have been taken at several universities and colleges and new courses have emerged with the aim of introducing students to various fields of English culture (especially arts), even if with the help of a non-specialist. These courses are, however, very often restricted to a certain period or some peripheral phenomenon, depending on the personal interest of the tutor and not the usefulness of the subject for the students. Still, especially because of their usually elective nature, these courses attract many students, who often

recognize the need of some wider understanding of English culture. A comprehensive course of 'English Cultural Studies' or a 'History of English Arts', even at an introductory level, is, however, still missing in perhaps all institutions of Hungarian higher education.

The other problem is that even in the field of literature not the real value of the literary works or the usefulness of their language was decisive, but literary periods were often given the same amount of time (eg one term = one century), independent of the fact whether the literature of the age concerned produced great achievements or not. Very often second- and third-rate poets and writers were discussed, while students were given no information on other, sometimes by international standards far more important fields of English culture. (Though there have always been exceptions, at least in the field of literature, like discussing one of Shakespeare's great dramas for a whole term.)

With the advent of optional courses and with the changes in our living conditions, travelling and communication opportunities, a lot of factors of language learning and teachers' training have improved, especially since the beginning of the nineties. Both teachers and students have greater freedom in offering and attending new courses, respectively, and there is at least some potential chance to integrate other aspects of English culture into the education of students. To avoid the errors of literature teaching, this time it would be, however, important to recognize which aspects of English culture, which periods, which branches of art are those that are important not only from the point of view of the development of English arts or culture, but also by European standards. Unless we have a lot of time to enlarge on every period and aspect of English culture, which will perhaps never be the case, we have to concentrate on those outstanding achievements of English arts that are also highlights of European arts. Such an example is English Gothic art and its best surviving form, English cathedral architecture. In the first part of the main body of this paper I will explain why I have found that this area should be an important part of our training in the field of cultural studies. In the remaining chapters I will try to summarize what features make the Gothic architecture of England different from that of other countries; what made England the leading power of Europe in the field of cathedral architecture in a given period (particularly the 14th century), why cathedral architecture is so important among the various fields of arts and as a result an indispensable part of our knowledge about the country whose language and culture we learn and teach. Finally I will also sum up what conclusions I have drawn from a decade's experience in teaching English arts.

2 The Englishness of English Gothic cathedral architecture

2.1 The importance of learning about English arts (Pragmatic and professional considerations)

As I have already indicated in some papers (eg: Abkarovits, 1995), everyday experience induced me to start introducing art courses to the training of our students. When escorting groups of our graduating students on trips to England and witnessing their visits to cathedrals or other churches or when listening to accounts of their private journeys or by asking them to fill in questionnaires about basic concepts (Eg 'What is a cathedral?', 'Which English cathedrals have you heard about?', 'What English painters or sculptors do you know?', 'Name some English composers.', etc), I had to realize that they did not have any information about these fields and they were also lacking the basic vocabulary, very often not only in the foreign language, but also in their native tongue. When they were guided around a cathedral, they could not understand the guide properly for lack of this vocabulary and also because they did not understand the essential features of church architecture. When visiting cathedrals on their own, they usually turned out to have missed some of the most famous and best parts, because they simply did not suspect the existence of certain constructions behind or beside the main body of the building. On the other hand, we all have the experience that the first thing, if you go to some bigger English town, is to visit its cathedral. For me it is almost unthinkable that one should go to York, Canterbury or Exeter, and not want to see their cathedrals. So, there are very practical reasons to learn something about the history of English arts and acquire some vocabulary in this field. On the other hand, it is not just the practical consideration, which should make us study English art history. A teacher of English is expected to know the culture, and, within that, the arts of England (and perhaps other English-speaking countries), or at least the greatest achievements of the various branches of their arts. The knowledge of English literature cannot compensate for all other aspects of arts, what is more, even literature cannot be properly understood without seeing the processes of the age in a wider context of the state of arts and culture.

2.2 Why just Gothic cathedral architecture?

As is the case with all nations, the English did not create outstanding works of arts in every century and in all fields of the arts. If we want to be honest, we have to admit that there have been relatively few periods and few

fields when and in which England played a leading role in the history of Western arts. English Gothic architecture is one of the few exceptions. Gothic has a special role in England. If we just take the sheer quantity of time into consideration when people were erecting buildings mainly in this style, we have to realize that during almost one half of the second millennium this was the predominant or most favoured artistic style in England. (Roughly, from 1150 to 1550, plus the Gothic revival of the 18th and 19th centuries.) (Watkin:156) Especially the last phase of English Gothic, the Perpendicular, is so much felt to be their own that it is often referred to as the 'national style' of England. The style of this Gothic period was revived in the eighteenth century and preferred to all other former styles.

The Anglo-Saxon period did not leave behind great churches. The Norman period was already characterised by large-scale construction activities and important fortresses and cathedrals have survived from this period. We can say, however, that, on the whole, the English did not build very original and outstanding constructions in this period either, though there are some exceptional achievements such as Durham cathedral, but even the latter has a mixture of styles and its importance is largely due to the fact that the three main features of Gothic architecture (ribbed vault, pointed arches, flying buttresses) are already present. But the earliest surviving pointed rib vaults (1120–1133) of the Middle Ages had no effect on the walls or piers. (Wilson: 19–23) Durham only anticipated the vaults of the Ile-de-France, but we cannot know if it exerted any influence on them.

The question of why just cathedral building became important at the beginning of the Gothic period is answered by Martindale in the following way: 'Much of the major building is cathedral architecture. Monasteries had had their churches by 1200, with which they were satisfied. By contrast, many towns were not satisfied with their main ecclesiastical building. The years 1140–1250 were a period in which it became possible to build churches the size and height of which had not been known since the fall of the Roman Empire.' (Martindale: 13)

It is the Gothic age when England created great works of art, even by European standards. Although Gothic was not born in England (though its main elements are already present in the dominantly Norman Durham cathedral, as we have seen), within a century England caught up with France and after the disaster of Beauvais cathedral, when the French were unable to renew their Gothic style, the English remained innovative and went on developing this style.

From Pevsner's remark it seems that even the English are not always aware of the real value of their achievements, especially concerning the Decorated period. 'In fact, the architecture of England between 1250 and

1350 was, although the English do not know it, the most forward, the most important, and the most inspired in Europe.' (Pevsner: 128)

Unfortunately not all aspects of English Gothic arts can be studied today. During the Reformation most of the wall- and panel paintings of England were destroyed, similarly, much (and perhaps the best) of the sculpture. For various reasons, the cathedrals were spared, while the similarly valuable buildings of the monastic orders were also destroyed. Today only the ruins of the formerly wonderful abbeys of the Cistercians can be marvelled at. In the later centuries of the Gothic age the architecture of the parish churches also showed high standards.

The reason why I find the discussion of cathedral architecture important is, however, not only its artistic quality. The cathedral was not simply a building in the Middle Ages, not just an important sacral centre, but it was what Harvey describes in this way: 'The cathedral of the Middle Ages reigns supreme as the chief of all art forms; the cathedral was not a church alone, it was the greatest of art galleries, the noblest of lecture halls, sublimest of opera houses. The best of sculpture, of painting, of music and of verse were not too good for its service.' (Harvey: 9)

Edwards writes about cathedrals: 'In England no buildings are more important as architecture or as embodiments of history, and not many buildings contain so much beauty.' (Edwards: 6)

As we can see today in many English towns, though not on as large a scale as in the Middle Ages, cathedrals are regaining their roles not only as religious, but also as cultural centres of their town.

So, we should not consider cathedrals simply as remains of architecture, but both as the religious centre of a town, which was normally planned to house its whole population standing, and as a site which provided space for a lot of activities, ranging from everyday legal and trade transactions to cultural events like theatre (passion plays) and musical performances and sites of the most important milestones of human life like birth, marriage, death (baptism, wedding, funeral ceremonies).

For the average visitor of cathedrals, who has not studied art history, all Gothic churches may look alike. There are however striking differences between the Gothic architecture of the different countries, such as England, France, Spain, Germany or Italy. My aim in the following parts is to sum up, as much as the limits of this paper permit, those characteristics which, as the main title of this chapter indicates, provide the Englishness of English cathedral architecture, which make it distinct from the Gothic of other countries. This can be best observed when it is contrasted to the Gothic of France, the birthplace of this style.

2.3 The origins of Gothic and the influence of France on English cathedral architecture in the Early English period

As is well-known, Gothic architecture was born in France, and what is rare in the history of arts, it can be traced to the exact building. Its birthplace was the abbey church of St. Denis near Paris, the burial place of French kings. (The rebuilding of the choir took place between 1140 and 1144.) Even the man behind the whole scheme is known: Abbot Suger.

Suger 'argued that we would come to understand absolute beauty, which is God, through the effect of precious and beautiful things on our senses. ... This was a revolutionary concept in the Middle Ages. It was the intellectual background of all the sublime works of art of the next century and in fact has remained the basis of our belief in the value of art until today.' (Clark : 50)

The fact that Gothic architecture was born at St. Denis does not mean that its main features had not existed before, but they were used here for the first time as an entity to organize the whole space. The combination of the already existing motifs were used for a new aesthetic purpose. (Pevsner: 89) Earlier, Normandy and Burgundy had been architecturally the more progressive parts of the French lands, but during the 12th and 13th centuries the Ile-de-France, the central area around Paris, became more important and several stupendous cathedrals were erected in the new style in this region. (Chartres, the Notre Dame of Paris, Reims, Amiens, Beauvais, etc)

What was typical of all these cathedrals was the quest for one perfect solution, the consistent application of verticality, the priority of height. They were usually built during one continuous building period, sometimes within the lifetime of a single architect, although most of them were never completed, at least as far as the towers and their spires are concerned, so we cannot know exactly what they would have looked like if their construction had been finished.

England had been influenced by the architecture of the cathedrals of the French lands well before this, since the time of Edward the Confessor, who was brought up in Normandy. From the time of the Norman Conquest Normandy had a decisive influence on English architecture. (Normandy became part of the French kingdom only in 1204–6.) Now the new Gothic style of France also played a strong initial influence on England, especially in Canterbury and Westminster Abbey, the latter being only architecturally a cathedral, otherwise, apart from a short period, it has not been the centre of the see of a bishop, which is the requirement of the title 'cathedral'.

But 'the introduction of Gothic into England was neither a single event, nor a continuous process, but rather a series of disconnected events'.

(Wilson: 72) This happened, because in the south-east there was no need to build a great church until the 1170s, as after the post-conquest boom a lull followed in the middle of the 12th century, and only accidental fires (like in Canterbury) or the collapse of Norman parts forced the clergy and the congregations to start major construction activities. On the other hand, in the north and west it was rather the influence of the Cistercians than that of the Ile-de-France that prevailed.

There were also some basic differences in the organization of the Church itself in the two countries. On the one hand, the cathedral was a typical product of a town on the Continent, the symbol of the growing riches of the burghers, while a monastery was typically built in far-away places. The two were exclusive of one another in several countries. Cathedrals were normally built for huge lay congregations in most countries and were served by 'secular' clergy. In England there were, however, some monastic cathedrals, so the two institutions got mixed up to a certain extent, often causing friction between the bishop and the monks. (Harvey: 210–211) But there were also several cathedrals in England which, although they had never had monks, had monastic buildings for show or practical purposes. (One of the best and most beautiful examples of this is the cloisters of Salisbury.) On the other hand, England was also different from France in the number of dioceses. The great provinces of France were almost like separate countries at that time and the number of dioceses was far more than in England, where there have always been just 2 archiepiscopal provinces and in the whole history of England there have been only about 100 cathedrals, 27 of which survive. 'When the Middle Ages ended there were still only 17 dioceses and about three times as many clergy to cover about 9500 parishes.' (Edwards: 29)

The relative small number also has a share in the high quality of English cathedrals. In connection with France we should not only think of the huge cathedrals of the Ile-de-France, but of the many insignificant ones of other provinces, too. (Harvey: 21) There were some basic differences even between French cathedrals and the French-like 'cathedral', Westminster Abbey, even the first, Norman version of which (built at the time of Edward the Confessor in 1045–1050) had already had the emphasis on length (as it became typical of English cathedrals) instead of the French emphasis on height. The French were obsessed with height and the rivalry in this field led to the disastrous collapse of some parts of Beauvais cathedral, which put an end to the until then continuous development of French Gothic. (1284)

The proximity of Normandy and the activity of some French master masons in England, like that of William of Sens in Canterbury, made their influence felt in the Early English period, but in later English cathedrals French features were avoided. As Wilson puts it, 'Canterbury was also an

end to the period of English receptiveness to French Gothic ideas.' (Wilson: 85) Of course, we should not understand this as a complete exclusion of all French ideas in the coming centuries, but there was an ongoing aversion to some large-scale imitation of French designs, while individual ideas were often welcome.

The typical semicircular termination of the apse with the ambulatory was retained only in 3 English cathedrals, in all the others, especially with the later addition of Lady Chapels, which were usually the extension of the Eastern arm, the flat ending was preferred. This made the construction of the huge windows on the square Eastern walls possible in the Decorated and Perpendicular periods.

Although Cistercian churches also have square ending sometimes, especially in the initial period, in many other respects they have so little in common with English cathedrals, that it is not likely that they were built under Cistercian influence. Some authors suppose that the preference for rectangular east ends may have been an Anglo-Saxon feature, suppressed at the Conquest, but reemerging a century later. (Coldstream: 17) There are also views according to which we can see the survival of some pagan elements in the strict Eastern orientation of the cathedrals and the efforts to let in as much light through the Eastern window as possible. We should not forget that England was pagan for several centuries during the first millenium, while many parts of Europe were continuously Christian. On the other hand, I find it interesting that from the point of view of designing the semicircular apse and the ambulatory around the sanctuary are the most difficult structural problems for the architect. (When Villard de Honnecourt copied the groundplans of the most important cathedrals of his time, he found only the Eastern arm important to draw, the design of the nave was shown only by one bay). (Cs. Tompos et al: 489). The English got rid of this problem by applying rectangular sections. This may also prove that they were not so much interested in the solution of structural problems, but in the ornamentation, and this will be more and more obvious during the evolution of English Gothic architecture.

Another field where the two countries took a different approach was the number and position of towers. Though very often the original plans of a greater number of towers were abandoned, so we cannot know exactly what these buildings might have looked like if everything planned had been built, still, it is obvious that the French laid the emphasis on the Western towers, while the English insisted on building a huge central tower, even if this caused a lot of technical problems for them. The four corner points of the crossing had to carry the tremendous weight of the central tower and its stone spire. The result was often collapse or near-collapse. In some

cathedrals the English took advantage of this problem and by applying stunning inverted arches, they supported the central tower. The inverted arches, although originally not part of the plan, became from then on one of the highlights of the church. The most famous example is Wells (1338), but Salisbury also has similar constructions.

Spires, and usually stone ones, were an essential component of the Englishness of these cathedrals. Most commonly the two Western towers and the central tower all had spires, but today only Lichfield preserves the three stone spires. Lichfield can give us an impression what the typical English cathedral may have looked like, although if we try to add spires to the towers of Lincoln in a photo, the upward pull of the cathedral is even more striking.

From the point of view of towers it is also decisive that many English cathedrals were not built surrounded by narrow streets, but in the middle of the spacious 'cathedral close'. So, it was not just the Western facade, which people could look at from a distance, but the whole volume of the cathedral, often from all sides. Under such conditions the central tower had a far more important aesthetic and symbolic role, and this may be part of the explanation why the English insisted on it. (Cs. Tompos et al: 551) (Another feature of the English 'cathedral close' was that it was often surrounded by a stone wall, and with the cathedral and the buildings of the bishop and the cannons it was almost like another settlement within the town.)

The application of substantial transepts and the insistence on the huge central tower are also in close connection, the former providing important support to the latter. The central tower of Beauvais collapsed, because the French built it before the construction of the nave, so it had no sufficient support from one side. Transepts were more projecting in England (also for the above mentioned structural reasons, which is also shown by the fact that where there are two pairs, the one supporting the central tower is more projecting than the other pair). The construction of two pairs of transepts does not come from the cathedrals of the Ile-de-France, but from Cluny, which was rebuilt in the 11th century. (Cluny III)

In spite of the great length of English cathedrals, this feature is not disturbing when inside, because we usually can't see the whole vista to the end of the church, as a screen often separates the choir from the nave. The screen sometimes has an organ on top of it, and the whole construction has been the subject of frequent criticism for centuries, as in Exeter.

Exeter, on the other hand, is the only exception in the field of the central tower, having none. The survival of two Norman towers on the sides made it unnecessary, bringing about in this way the longest unbroken vaulting of

England. It is a unique experience to visit the loft area of Exeter cathedral, where this great length is even more obvious.

While the French tried to have some unity of space from the beginning, almost all English cathedrals have a patchwork character, with the various parts of the church built in successive periods, often incorporating Norman remains and having substantial sections from the different periods of Gothic. (See Appendix) This may be due to historical circumstances, to the lack of enough money, but some authors also suppose that this is another feature of English architecture, namely that with their additive approach they rather joined one compartment to the other while the French preferred spatial concentration. (Pevsner:119).

But just the example of Exeter shows that, while the English went on building their cathedrals sometimes for centuries, they were also able to follow the original concept if they wanted to. At Exeter five successive bishops had the cathedral built in a consistent style between the 1270s and the 1370s. 'Thanks to them this church, which was not one of the richer cathedrals in the Middle Ages, was one of the most glorious.' (Edwards: 27)

As to the number of aisles, England usually had two, while French cathedrals often had four. In general, England insisted on the basilica type also in later periods, avoided building hall churches, where the nave and the aisles are of equal height. (Except for Bristol.) In England the aisles are much lower than the nave, and behind their roof the triforium can be found. It is one of the usual three levels of the nave, although in some cases the number is reduced to two. The four-storey elevation, which can be seen in some French cathedrals, never became popular in England. (Martindale: 30) The most common order of the tiers is: arcades, triforium, clerestorey windows. It is the proportion of these levels to each other which is often decisive from the point of view of the aesthetic effect. Even a non-specialist may have the impression on entering a cathedral nave that something is wrong with the building, but perhaps he can't put his finger on it. I myself had had such impressions in certain cathedrals and these feelings were later justified when reading the analysis of a specialist about the proportions of the tiers.

The use of a triforium instead of gallery had been general practice since Chartres in France, too, but the English tended to have small clerestory windows first, and they were very often deep ones, unlike those of most French cathedrals which had the glass on the inner plane of the wall. (Though there are exceptions in England as well, like the clerestory at York.)

Another characteristic of English cathedrals regarding the tiers is the ongoing emphasis on the horizontality of these levels. While the French lead the shafts from the floor to the vaulting, even such well-proportioned naves

like that of Wells go on having the horizontal division lines of the three tiers, breaking the vertical pull in this way. Especially in the light of later developments (eg the hall churches of the new preaching orders in other countries, particularly in Germany), it becomes more and more obvious that the English remained conservative in this respect: instead of attempting to achieve spatial unity they go on dividing the space and surfaces. (Vertically into arcades, triforium, clerestorey; horizontally into nave and aisles; longitudinally into bays, as well as, nave, choir and retrochoir.) In spite of the additive character of building and the insistence on divisions, some cathedrals (such as York, Lincoln, Lichfield) don't make the visitor feel uneasy about the lack of spatial unity, while in some other cathedrals, like Gloucester you feel as if you were passing from one church into a completely different one when you approach the choir or retrochoir from the nave.

The patchwork or additive character must have been a national peculiarity, because they followed it not only in places where surviving remains of former buildings hampered the design of the new construction, but this had been typical in Anglo-Saxon times and in some new foundations as well. (Pevsner:121) The groundplan of Salisbury, which was built from scratch on a new site, is basically not much different from that of many other English cathedrals.

Amiens and Lincoln might be good examples to show the differences in the English and French approaches to cathedral building. Many of the above mentioned differences are clearly shown by the groundplans. (Illustration from Cs. Tompos et al: 478, 554)

The French preferred simple, but high vaulting. The English got more and more interested in decoration. The groundplan of Lincoln shows various solutions, even patterns that defy structural logic, like the 'crazy vault' of the choir. (Coldstream: 20) In England the structurally needed ribs were often completed by a central ridge-rib, from where additional ribs, also the so called tiercerons were started. The ridge-rib and the tiercerons were first introduced at Lincoln. The junctions were richly decorated bosses. 'The evident pleasure in surface ornament became a feature of English Gothic architecture and reached its first climax in the rebuilding of Lincoln cathedral (begun in 1192).' (Martindale: 32)

Stained glass did not play as important a role in England as in France, at least the quality of Chartres and some other cathedrals was never reached in England during the Middle Ages. The best ones are said to be those of the Corona at Canterbury. Even the effect of applying stained glass was different in the two countries. French stained glass provided a mystic

atmosphere excluding the outside world, while English stained glass windows let the light come in.

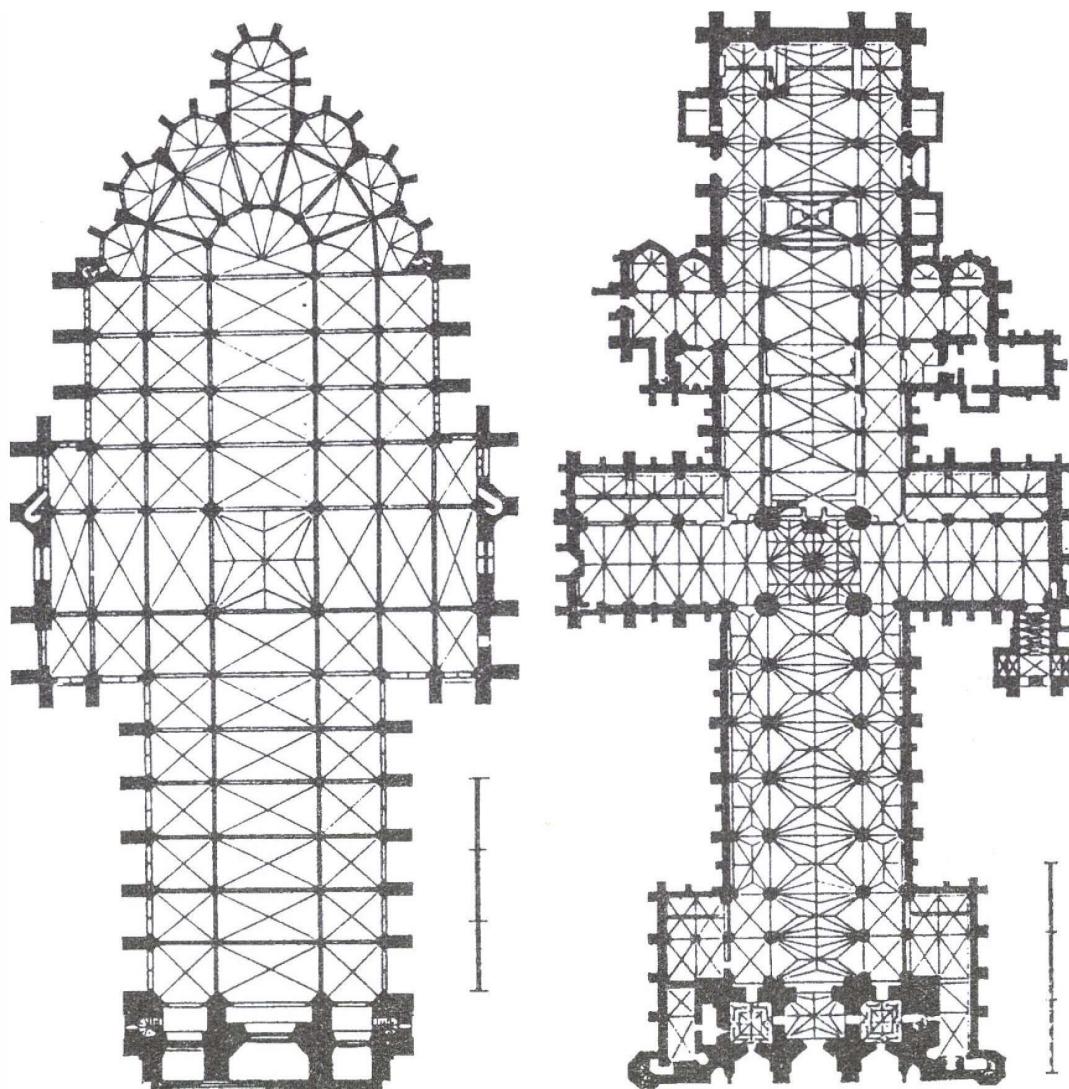


Illustration: The groundplans of Amiens and Lincoln

Many paintings were commissioned for churches and palaces around the middle of the 13th century, but later almost all the painting on a larger scale has vanished. Frescoes and altarpieces were destroyed in churches by the Puritans, usually only fragments survive. It would have been easier for illuminated manuscripts to survive, as was the case with French books, but as Henry III was not a bibliophile, no royal manuscripts date from his time. (And not much from the following periods either.) (Martindale: 131)

Much of the sculpture is lost in England. The doorways were never so richly decorated sculpturally as in France. Even the cathedral facades that

used to have the greatest number of sculptures, like Wells, have small, unimportant doorways. The splendour of the original Wells facade, the first of its type in Gothic England, with its painted and gilded sculptures must have been a dazzling sight for medieval people. As for individual sculptures, only a few – mainly royal – tombs (like those at Westminster or that of Edward II at Gloucester) excel from among the few surviving pieces of the various Gothic periods.

2.4 Gothic cathedral architecture after 1250

The division of Gothic into periods may vary with different authors. Pevsner calls the period after 1250 'Late Gothic' for the continent. In connection with England the traditional division is: Early English (1150–1250), Decorated (1250–1350), Perpendicular (1350–1550, the second hundred years of which is often called Tudor).

The differences discussed in the previous chapter had been present from almost the very beginning and remained typical features of English Gothic in later periods, too. Although the English introduced remarkable innovations and avoided direct imitations of French examples, the French were unquestionably the leading power in Gothic arts in the whole of Europe during the period until 1250, which is called Early English in England and High Gothic in France. They soon reached such perfect solutions which were difficult to surpass, and excesses in increasing height soon led to the already mentioned disastrous consequences.

The historical background did not favour French arts either. After the long and prosperous reign of Louis IX, more difficult times were to come. A hostile atmosphere surrounded France. The development of towns slowed down, the benefits drawn from the Crusades were over, general stagnation was typical of the economy, and in the fourteenth century, at the beginning of the Hundred Years' War the French were the losers.

In England the second half of the thirteenth century saw the birth of national consciousness. The spirit of nationalism (with all its good and bad sides) was awakened in Europe for the first time here. While earlier the language of the upper classes had been French in England, English became the language of the whole nation now for the first time. Edward I invaded Wales and parts of Scotland and carried out large-scale construction activity. (Welsh castles) The first universities were set up. His grandson, Edward III, started the Hundred Years' War against France and was successful at first. But in 1348–49 the Black Death killed almost half of the population. It is

difficult to ignore these events when we discuss the development of the arts of this period. (Halliday: 56–57)

Before that, however, during the second half of the 13th century the Church was rich and fearing that Edward I might confiscate their money for his wars, they invested it into building activity. These facts all prove how much political events, economic conditions and the state of culture are intertwined. And from among all fields of arts it is architecture that is the least inseparable from the conditions of its age. While a poet or painter can make himself independent of the general conditions of his time, at least to a certain extent, architecture can flourish only under proper circumstances.

So, it is not by chance that perhaps the most prosperous period of English architecture was between 1250 and 1350, and that later, during the 200 years of Perpendicular (and Tudor), not a single new cathedral was built, only parts of older cathedrals were rebuilt or Lady Chapels and towers were added or completed.

The wealth of the Church at the time of Henry III and the first Edwards made the construction of outstanding pieces of architecture possible like the best examples of Decorated Gothic (the nave of Exeter, the cloisters and chapter house of Salisbury, the Angel Choir of Lincoln, the nave of Lichfield, the chapter house of Wells, the nave of York, the octagon of Ely, etc). I think it is typical especially of this period, what is sometimes said about English cathedrals in general, that 'a warmth, a welcoming and homely quality...' is the ruling atmosphere of these cathedrals, which cannot be found in most Gothic cathedrals in other countries. Moderation and the quest for the golden mean, preoccupation with decoration, especially lines are typical. (Harvey: 21)

From the 1240s bar tracery, which had been probably invented in Reims, had a strong impact on the development of English architecture. The name 'Decorated' was coined originally for the period following the arrival of window tracery. All further innovations of tracery in following periods, like wall tracery, can be deduced from window tracery.

What is typical of Decorated architecture is not some kind of structural unity; on the contrary, most new constructions were just extensions to or replacement of earlier parts. 'The architects of the time were interested only indirectly in structural problems. Their main preoccupations were with ornament and shapes, whether in ground-plans, vault patterns or window tracery, and structural changes were made primarily to accommodate new ideas about the forms.' (Coldstream: 10) Unfortunately, after the destructions of the Puritans and the neglect of the following centuries, it is very difficult to imagine today what the Decorated churches might have looked like, with all their carved and painted sculptures, paintings, liturgical furniture, and

precious metals. It is mainly window traceries and vaulting patterns that can give us some idea of the overwhelming interest in ornamentation, which had been typical of the English, to varying degrees, also in earlier periods.

The birth of the Decorated style can be identified with Henry III's decision to choose Westminster Abbey, out of his devotion to Edward the Confessor, as the royal church of England. He had the church of Edward demolished, which was similar in groundplan, just with shorter transepts and had a central tower according to the Bayeux tapestry, and started to build a more beautiful one. But when the king died, only the sanctuary, the transepts, and the choir were completed. (Fox: 8)

Westminster was to merge the functions of three main royal churches of France: Reims (coronation church), St Denis (burial place of the French kings) and Sainte-chapelle (the chapel of the royal court with the most important relics). The ornate quality of Westminster, especially inside, even today, when it has been deprived of most of its earlier decoration, is apparent and was due to the influence of the newly built Saint-chapelle in Paris, which had been constructed to house the relics of the Crown of Thorns and part of the True Cross, giving the impression of a metal reliquary turned inwards. (Coldstream:12) Westminster is rather un-English when we consider its height, rose windows, polygonally apsed east end, etc. On the other hand, it shows several English characteristics (deep gallery, ridge rib, great width, etc), and just in the field of window tracery it had an important effect on the development of English architecture, as in the 1240s English cathedrals still had plain lancets, while French great churches had already been embellished with huge windows with bar tracery. 'The true significance of Westminster lies in its decoration, the ornament and the tracery.' (Coldstream: 25)

However, royal Westminster was not followed by other English cathedrals, perhaps except for the windows. (Martindale:101) (Besides other factors its costliness may also have played a part in this. No other patron could afford to spend that much money on a church.) Wells and Lincoln set the examples for the others. All English cathedrals insisted on having relatively thick walls and as a result, they did not need the huge flying buttresses of the French. Even if they used them, they tried to hide them under the roof of the triforium or otherwise. The French, on the other hand, enjoyed displaying them. (Eg Notre Dame, Paris)

Two new cathedral works were begun in the 1250s: the Angels' Choir at Lincoln (consecrated in 1280) and Old St Paul's. The latter was the biggest cathedral of the time, built mainly under the influence of the Notre Dame, Paris, but also showing typical English features like the rectangular ending and the usual English elevation. It exerted the strongest influence on future

cathedrals in the field of tracery. The Europe-wide fashion of applying naturalistic leaf sculpture was best shown here, as well as at Lincoln and Southwell.

But the decorated cathedral 'par excellence' is Exeter, which, apart from the above mentioned two Norman towers, was wholly built in Decorated 'with greater stylistic consistency than any other pre-Reformation English cathedral except Salisbury.' (Clifton-Taylor: 147)

In Exeter the ribs starting from the springer take almost the shape of palm trees during the Decorated period. The origin of these palm tree-like ribs was the chapter house, a typical English building-type. The archetype was the Westminster Chapter House, English in its octagonal shape, but having huge French traceried windows. (1253) One of the highlights of many English cathedrals is their Decorated chapter house. (Wells, York, Salisbury, etc) This building type is, however, not a new invention of the Decorated, as we know circular (eg Worcester from the Norman period) and polygonal (eg Lincoln or Lichfield from the mid thirteenth century) examples before them, having basically the same arrangement. But Decorated chapter houses surpass the others in beauty.

The English did not have many rose windows. They had more and more complicated bar tracery instead. The square Eastern ending made the erection of an enormous Eastern window with rich bar tracery possible. First simple geometric elements (circles, quatrefoils, trefoils, etc) were used during the Decorated period (Lincoln), which were later followed by less attractive and less fanciful Perpendicular divisions (York, Gloucester).

The roof of the Eastern termination rose in the north and east of England sheer from ground to apex, in the south and west the high gable is set back from the East end, in the latter case enabling the erection of two big Eastern windows, one for the choir, the other for the Lady Chapel. (Harvey: 74) Instead of the gloom of French cathedral terminations, England tends to have more and more light at the Eastern end till the whole Eastern wall is transformed into a glass-wall of the size of a tennis-court at Gloucester. These huge Eastern windows are however rather unimaginative in their design. (Clifton-Taylor: 213)

It is usual to divide the Decorated period into Geometric and Curvilinear. After the simple forms of tracery in the Geometric period, which could be drawn with the help of a liner and compasses, in the first half of the 14th century, for the first time in the history of Gothic arts, its ruling arch form, the pointed one was abandoned for the sake of the ogee arch, which had existed in Islam arts long before. One of the most famous examples is the Lady Chapel at Ely. (1335–1349) Another unique feature of Ely from this period is the octagon and lantern for the crossing, which may be a deliberate

attempt at breaking with the thirteenth century's discipline of right angles. (Pevsner: 138)

As mentioned above, political, economic, and living conditions changed radically around the middle of the fourteenth century. It is almost symbolic that the Black Death put an end not only to the lives of half of the population, but also to the artistic period (Decorated), which meant possibly the climax of English Gothic arts. Though English Gothic remained innovative and influential during the next (Perpendicular) period as well, its decoration is felt decadent, too lush by many people. Some experts feel even the Curvilinear decadent, while others deny this. (Coldstream: 9)

While Early and High Gothic showed a lot of similarities in Western European countries, Late Gothic was characterised by more national characteristics everywhere. But even in this period the various countries exerted strong influence on each other, and eg it is difficult to imagine the star and net vaulting of Germany or Spain without the English examples. In Lincoln ribs began to get separated from the vaulting long ago, and the English influence is felt as far away as in the Vladislav Hall in Prague Castle. (Martindale: 224)

Although not completely Perpendicular, Gloucester is the archetype of Perpendicular. The choir was rebuilt in 1350 and a century later the Lady Chapel was added and it became one of the most important examples of Perpendicular.

Fan-vaulting was also born here in the cloisters in the form of inverted half cones, but it was used for decoration in cathedrals only in the retro-choir of Peterborough and in the tower of Canterbury. The most famous large-scale fan-vault, without pendants, is that of King's College Chapel at Cambridge. (Clifton-Taylor: 226–230) The future development of the vaulting designs is represented not by cathedrals, but royal chapels. (King's College Chapel, Cambridge; Henry VII Chapel, Westminster Abbey; St. Stephen's, Westminster Palace; St. George's, Windsor Castle) The only exception is the pendant lierne-vault of Oxford cathedral. 'Structurally, this is a feat of extraordinary architectural ingenuity, to which no Late Gothic buildings on the continent of Europe offer any close parallel.' (Clifton-Taylor: 232)

The cult of relics had been important for a long time. (Earlier they had been preserved in the crypts, but as the crypts caused structural problems, in several cathedrals they were done away with, and the relics were put on public display in the retro-choir. This was also important from the point of view of pilgrims.) In England they had never had as precious relics as the French or the Spaniards (Sainte-chapelle, Chartres, Santiago de Compostela, etc), which were connected to the life of Christ and his disciples. So, local

holy men, very often the first bishops, were revered as saints. At the beginning of the Gothic period these bishops were also often felt as symbols of the Englishness, when most of the aristocracy, particularly those connected more closely to the court, spoke in French.

The future saints, neither representatives of the clergy, nor those of royalty, had to lead a saintly life necessarily. Even people (living in quite distant ages) like Thomas Beckett (d. 1170) and Edward II (d. 1327), who had been despised during their lifetime, when killed in a cruel way, quickly turned into martyrs and their shrines became centres of pilgrimages and as a result, a source of revenue for the cathedral. It is not by chance that Perpendicular was born at Gloucester, which managed to get the bones of Edward II, and had a beautiful shrine built for the relics, and the until then unimportant monastery suddenly became a centre of pilgrimage. The money the pilgrims brought enabled the clergy to rebuild most parts of the church gradually, with the exception of the nave.

As mentioned above, the relics were usually kept in shrines in the retrochoir of most cathedrals, and the spreading cult of the Virgin (in the Lady Chapel) made the Eastern extension of the church also necessary. In France the central chapel of the apse was normally dedicated to the Virgin, while in England a whole new section was usually added to the Eastern end. As the choir itself was as long as some naves in France, through extending it with a retrochoir or Lady Chapel the Western and Eastern arms became equally long in several cases.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth century England went on experimenting while the development in France came to a halt. In spite of this, as already mentioned, because of the halving of the population in 1348–49 and the decreasing incomes of the Church, as well as the less successful continuation of the Hundred Years' War and later the consequences of the War of Roses, no new cathedral constructions were begun, only additions and alterations took place. Innovations were typical of the decoration of vaults and other surfaces. Besides the tierceron ribs of the Decorated style, lierne ribs appear, having no structural function at all, just pleasing the English preference for linear decoration. During the Perpendicular period not only the vaults, but also the wall surfaces were divided by ribs, and not just vertically, as the name would suggest, but also horizontally. That is why 'Rectilinear' is also used as an alternative term. Because of this grid the whole space takes on a cage-like effect. Again Gloucester, especially its Lady Chapel, can be mentioned as a typical example.

Many cathedrals managed to (re)build their central tower only in the Perpendicular period. Gloucester, Canterbury and Worcester are perhaps the most successful ones. On the whole, I can agree with Harvey, who says

'The special triumphs of Perpendicular architects were mainly centered on two features: towers and vaults.' (Harvey: 224) In some cathedrals it is precisely these two things that are the most outstanding features, as at Norwich, which has the second highest tower in England (with one of the four surviving stone spires of a central tower) and several hundreds of gilded and carved bosses at the junctions of the vault ribs.

I think Pevsner is right when he says 'To find English architecture of 1350 to 1525 at its best, one should visit not cathedrals and abbey churches, but manor houses and parish churches for the happiest ensembles, and the royal chapels for the highest architectural standard.' (Pevsner: 153)

So, the period was over, when the guiding principle was to build one huge church for the whole town. Parish churches, though they had existed for a longer period, had an increasing importance, but they are beyond the scope of this paper. No new cathedral was built in England until Old St. Paul's was destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666, but by that time the Gothic era had long been over.

3 Conclusion

Though the limits of this paper do not make it possible to give a more detailed description of the differences between English Gothic and the Gothic arts of other countries (especially France), I think even the arguments of the preceding chapter (mainly on cathedral architecture for lack of surviving evidence in other fields of arts) are sufficient to prove that English Gothic has a distinctive national character. The French gave a strong initial impetus to the development of English Gothic cathedral architecture. (And probably to painting and sculpture as well, but as they have largely vanished, the two countries are difficult to compare in these fields). But in the 13th century the English gradually broke away from the French influence, developed their own style, which did not aim so much at structural perfection, but at more and more sophisticated decoration. As we have seen, after the French dominance in Europe until the middle of the thirteenth century, during the following period it was England that was able to develop its Gothic with new ideas and became the leading country in the field of cathedral architecture for at least a century. Though Perpendicular is called the 'national style' of England by many authors (just as several other countries developed their own Gothic style in that period), I think the Decorated Gothic between 1250 and 1350 is the climax of English Gothic architecture and also the most important period by European standards, though Perpendicular undoubtedly also showed a lot of innovative ideas.

We have also seen how closely the different factors of life (political and military events, the state of the economy, major epidemics, the contribution of outstanding individuals, both patrons and artists, etc) are linked with the development of arts. It is not by chance that France was the leading country in architecture when the principalities united under the leadership of the king, there was economic boom in the country, the Crusades contributed to the growing wealth of the towns and their citizens. And it is not by chance either that when from the second half of the thirteenth century the economic boom was over and military defeats weakened the French kingdom, opportunities to build new cathedrals from scratch also dried up. And similarly, the relative stability under Henry III (1216–1272) and Edward I (1272–1302) in England, with the military victories and the increasing prosperity of trade, etc, largely contributed to a situation in which arts could flourish. And it is no sheer coincidence either that Decorated Gothic came to an end when the Black Death halved the population of England and the initial victories of the Hundred Years' War were followed by defeats.

So, without understanding the historical background, learning about political, military events, economic, cultural, religious tendencies, etc it is unthinkable to understand the development of arts, should it be literature or fine arts, least of all architecture.

These are the considerations why I think a complex study of a specific age or/and of the whole historical process comprising all major aspects of life would be necessary to understand the development of British culture and civilisation. A course that might be called 'A Cultural History of England' (or 'Cultural Studies') could serve this purpose best. But as it is an extremely complex area, few tutors may feel competent and confident to teach all major periods and fields of English culture. I can see two possible solutions. One is to devide the lectures on the various epochs (eg, using terms of history of art, Norman, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, etc England) among specialists of these periods from different institutions of higher education. (We have talked about the possibility of this kind of 'travelling circus' at national conferences organized by the British Council, but this idea has not been put into practice yet for organizational difficulties.) The other solution is to divide this complex area into specialised courses either according to historical periods or the fields of culture, and teach only those where a specialist is available. There have been tentative attempts at the latter in Hungarian higher education in recent years. I myself started teaching optional courses to introduce students to English arts almost a decade ago. It seems students have also realized the need of such a course and its popularity is constantly increasing. A number of students have chosen

English arts as the topic of their final thesis, many of them wrote on Gothic cathedral architecture.

We have to cope with fundamental difficulties with each year of students. They have little knowledge of art history, they lack the basic vocabulary of art terms both in their mother tongue and in English, they don't know much about the Christian religion, without which it is impossible to understand Western art. We should not forget that Medieval art is basically of a liturgical nature. At that time most works of art were created to please and serve God. All parts of a cathedral were built with some liturgical function. It is rather rare – although in England it is perhaps a bit more common than in some other countries – that something was built just for its beauty, and not for some function. (Think of the cloisters at Salisbury.) But even in such cases the ultimate aim of people may have been to please and glorify God.

England is a very special country, known for its conservatism. Gothic has stayed with English people eversince the Gothic age, not only through the survival of the works of art of that age, but they applied some of its features in the following periods as well. English aristocrats usually did not want to live in direct imitations of French Renaissance or Baroque palaces, they were happy to dwell in Gothic or timber-framed buildings. In their new palaces Gothic often survived either in the structure or in the decoration, until it was explicitly revived in the Romantic period of the 18th and 19th centuries. So, Gothic is not simply one of the periods of art in England. And cathedral architecture is not just one of the fields of English Gothic, but the most important one. This is why studying about English Gothic cathedral architecture is an indispensable element in our understanding English culture.

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Appendix

Gothic construction periods at some French and English cathedrals (and some royal churches) before 1350

