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Chartres Cathedral, south of Paris, is revered as one of the most beautiful and profound works of art in the Western canon. But what did it mean to those who constructed it in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries? And why, during this time, did Europeans begin to build churches in a new style, at such immense height and with such glorious play of light, in the soaring manner we now call Gothic?

Universe of Stone shows that the Gothic cathedrals encode a far-reaching shift in the way medieval thinkers perceived their relationship with their world. For the first time, they began to believe in an orderly, rational world that could be investigated and understood. This change marked the beginning of Western science and also the start of a long and, indeed, unfinished struggle to reconcile faith and reason.

By embedding the cathedral in the culture of the twelfth century—its schools of philosophy and science, its trades and technologies, its politics and religious debates—Philip Ball makes sense of the visual and emotional power of Chartres. Beautifully illustrated and written, filled with astonishing insight, *Universe of Stone* argues that Chartres is a sublime expression of the originality and vitality of a true "first renaissance," one that occurred long before the birth of Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, or Francis Bacon.

Universe of Stone: A Biography of Chartres Cathedral Details

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From Reader Review *Universe of Stone: A Biography of Chartres Cathedral* for online ebook

Tariq Mahmood says

The book gives a view of Gothic style of architecture using the Chartres Cathedral as the main focus. For me who is very ignorant about architecture it was not an easy read especially when it came to the various design differences etc but I was captivated with the cultural aspect of the story. The different roles of workers and their sponsors who were responsible for creating such marvellous buildings. The power of faith in Europe must be at a entirely different level to be able to finish such ambitious projects indeed.

Siria says

Despite the title, this book is less about Chartres itself than it is about exploring the intellectual and technological circumstances which made the construction of it and the other great Gothic cathedrals possible. Ball is not a medievalist, and so *Universe of Stone* is largely a synthesis of the works of other historians and art historians. He does write compellingly, particularly when it comes to conjuring up the sheer mass and weight of these buildings. Yet while Ball's clearly read some of the big names, the lack of breadth in his reading is apparent.

There are some silly factual mistakes—for instance, a cartulary is not (or isn't always) "the cathedral records" (64)—but more importantly, a failure to understand some of the ways in which the medieval worldview was different to our own. For a patron to claim (or be claimed as) the one who had built (or "made", *fecit*) a church wasn't the mere consequence of aristocratic or clerical disdain for manual labour—it reflected a very different understanding of the relationship between conception and execution. (If you want a modern example, look at Damien Hirst's art—what is "his" and what isn't?) There are a number of anachronistic takes like that scattered throughout the text. While Ball may know the mechanics by which the stones of Chartres were fitted together, his understanding of the universe which they inhabited is less complete.

Linda says

I visited Chartres and it's cathedral earlier this year. To know a little more about this famous building, I decided to read this book.

I... got to know a bit more than just "a little".

This book is DENSE. Incredibly dense. It doesn't just discuss the building, but places it in a historical context, describing the political and religious situation of the time in which the cathedral was build. Thus, the narrative frequently moves away from Chartres, most often to Paris and St Denis. It also goes indepth on architecture, masonry and glasswork.

The sheer density of the material didn't make for an easily read book. It was admittedly frequently rather a slog. At times it felt like I was learning TOO MUCH about Chartres, or rather that the narrative was getting away from the subject of the book, i.e. the cathedral.

Nice book if you want to know more about Chartres or gothic cathedrals in general, but not an easy read. 3 stars.

Peter Mcloughlin says

Charming book on Chartres Cathedral and the culture that created it and its engineering and artwork. Interesting peek into a symbol of the medieval cosmos.

Abbey says

I really enjoyed this book. I have a very basic background in Medieval history and none at all in architecture, but didn't find Philip Ball at all too much. Although he deals with some fairly complex ideas (or what seem complex for those who know nothing about them!) he makes them easy to understand and not only interesting but completely fascinating.

Frankly, I was entranced. I found the philosophical and religious links to the Gothic style interesting and the detail about the style's development and the way the cathedrals were built fascinating.

Kenzie says

This book provides a great historical explanation of the religious and philosophical climate during which Chartres Cathedral was built (as well to what extent these religious/philosophical ideas influence the building) and an even better explanation of how the cathedral was actually built. Laying of stones, stained glass, stone carving were all addressed in fascinating detail. (These details feel particularly interesting after reading *Pillars of the Earth* earlier this year.)

Because this book is concerned with laying out a "biography" it doesn't offer much in the way of interpretation of the cathedral's imagery. I appreciated the historical tone, though, because I felt that what *was* said about the art could be trusted to be reasonably accepted among those who study the cathedral.

Miriam says

Ball gives a good overview of the debates concerning the Gothic as a style, with architectural and philosophical elements. In general, he introduces the various sides of a debate (the East end was started first, the West end was started first; the builder knew the neo-Platonist philosophy, he was just doing his best with available materials), shows the flaws in each side, and then ultimately concludes "Well, we may never know, but it's probably some of both or the prettiest solution is best." It's an honest portrait, I'm not saying that he falsely brings disparate views together. As most of this relies on the scholarship of others, he's not looking to enter the fray but to sidestep the slings and arrows that the other scholars use on each other (he does take some pot shots himself, too, though).

I like reading history because I like seeing other people manipulate quotations and sources to make their

arguments--I don't have details from Chartres Cathedral on that, but here's what some other monk said about a similar church about forty years later. I like seeing the logic of my discipline explained in practice, although in general I find it like decent magicians must feel watching each other work. Yeah, that's pretty good. You don't FOOL me, but that's pretty good.

Kristine Morris says

This book was fascinating! I enjoyed both aspects - the first part of the book that talks about the philosophy of medieval thinkers and how it related to the Gothic church crusade and the more practical chapters on how it was actually built. What seems so surprising to me is that we still don't know a lot of answers. In this book you find a little bit of everything: the Roman Empire, the Kings of France, St. Augustine, monasteries, medieval art, history of geometry, Platonic cosmology, abbots, the philosophy of beauty, the church as school, freemasons, medieval scaffolding, stained glass, the worship of lights, money, miracles, architectural thrust, groin vaults and ribs and of course flying buttresses! Of course now I have to revisit Chartres. What a hardship that will be. Oh and probably it's time to re-read the Pillars of the Earth by Ken Follett (and the new sequel).

Diane says

This book tells the story of the building of Chartres Cathedral in France. It also looks at the philosophical and theological trends current at the time of the building. The author seeks to weave the wider historical and philosophical overview into the history of the cathedral, but the two stories never quite come together. I feel like he jumps back and forth between the narrow history of the cathedral, and the wider history of the European world at that time, without ever reconciling them. He also wades in to several controversies about the building of the cathedral, but never takes a firm position on what he believes is the correct answer, which weakens the book overall.

Renee says

There's a lot of interesting information here about structural development, medieval guilds, and comparisons between various cathedrals built in the Gothic style. There is also a lot of disrespect paid to art history (except when he finds it convenient to stand on their shoulders to draw his own seemingly pre-determined aesthetic conclusions) and a lot of blatant bullshittery where he fills in the blanks of scanty documentations with barely-related other texts and overt wish fulfillment.

It was worth the read, but not quite as smart as it thinks it is. Then again, reading over his previous works, the titles themselves are a clue about the sweeping generalizations he is fond of.

Tom Ewing says

I had to give this one up because I dropped it in the bath. Was it any good up to the point I'd read to? Well, it wasn't bad. Philip Ball is a polymath - every one of his books isn't just about a different topic, it involves a

completely different discipline: the two others of his I own are the fascinating Critical Mass, on using physics to analyse social behaviour, and the (not read yet) Water Kingdom, a history of China centred on its relationship with water.

This means that a Philip Ball book is about an intelligent person trying to get to grips with a topic, as much as it is about their actual conclusions on the topic. The synthesis of primary sources is the subject of the work as much as its precondition. It can be a very rewarding approach, as Ball IS intelligent, and his journey of discovery matches the readers. But in Universe Of Stone he's faced with a question - why did the people who built Chartres Cathedral build it how they did? - where the available evidence is thin, and the various scholars have hardened their positions over the years into entirely incompatible tribes. Chartres was 'sacred geometry', minutely planned so that every detail is an act of worship! No it's not, it was built piecemeal and it's a testimony to architectural invention not religious faith! And so on. Ball is inclined to doubt the wilder claims, but he's also attracted to the idea that the Gothic cathedrals really do represent a philosophical and intellectual break. But the specifics of this break are frustratingly hard to capture - as is almost everything about the builders' pre-modern mindset. Even at the point I had to abandon it, it felt like Chartres' monumentalism had defeated Ball's clarity.

Bill Leach says

Ball examines the Chartres Cathedral in the context of the Medieval world in which it was built.

Religious thought dominated the period and science was largely a process of scanning works of the past in hope of recovering some of the lost knowledge of antiquity. Ball reviews the important figures of the time and their views on learning.

The cathedral school at Chartres became a center of learning, being a major conduit of Arabic science and mathematics.

Ball describes the men who planned the Chartres cathedral, and provides much detail on the evolution of the design and architecture, building methods and the organization of the labour.

While the town's people contributed money that helped finance the construction, the total amounts were small. Much of the financing came from taxes on the land. Relics were major fund raisers.

Rob Adey says

Ball uses Chartres Cathedral as a lens through which to examine medieval thought and history, but that maybe ends up being a bit more of a limited lens than I thought it was going to be. You'll probably get more out of the book if, unlike me, you've been to or heard of Chartres Cathedral; ideally you'd read the book *in* Chartres Cathedral. Are you allowed to read non-Bibles in a cathedral? I bought *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* in Durham Cathedral's bookshop, so I suspect you can.

Kalliope says

Got this today. Looks very good. A treat.

Antonio says

A very exciting tour de force through Gothic buildings in particular and to the science of that time. Several concepts from engineering and architecture are introduced in order to explain the Goth cathedral. The mechanics of arcs, vaults, foundations, etc are explained and put in the context of Europe in the X - XIII centuries. Mainly, is a book about science in those times, and the cite from Adelard of Bath is overwhelming: "If we turned our backs on the amazing rational beauty of the universe we live in, we should indeed deserve to be driven therefrom, like a guest unappreciative of the house into which he has been received." A very good definition of science.

The ideas in the book try to guide the reader to the fact that buildings, even cathedrals, are culture-dependent: the paradigm behind "Gothic cathedrals" is the result of the new of social perception about the universe. Cathedrals, being maps of the universe, reflects those new views.
