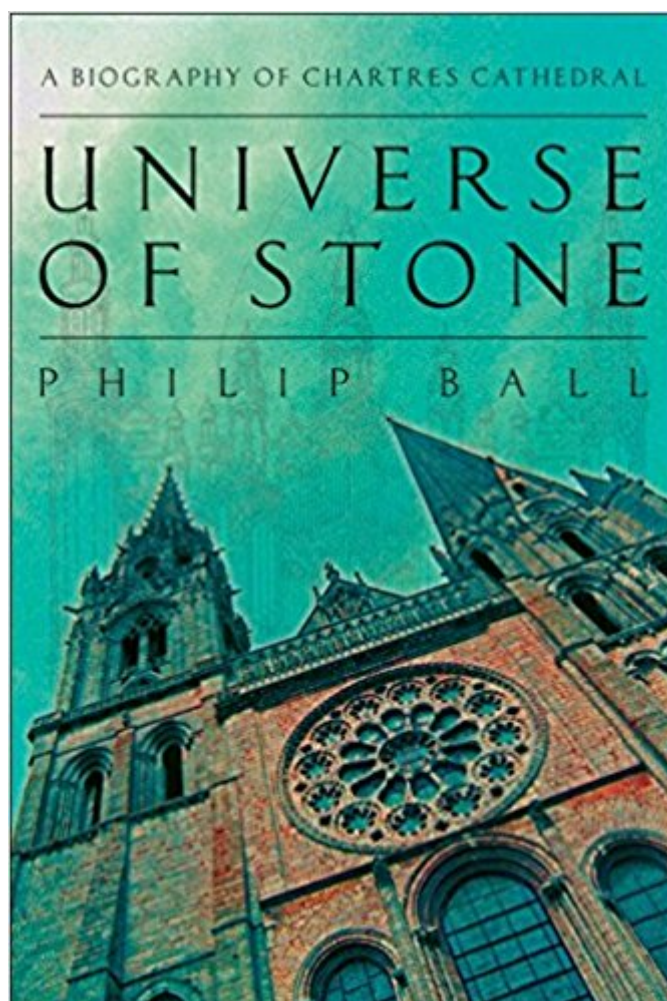


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Universe Of Stone: A Biography Of Chartres Cathedral



Synopsis

A well written study of Gothic architecture, and Chartres Cathedral in particular, looking at the theological and philosophical ideas on which it was founded, and the practicalities of its construction to ultimately aim to show what it may have "meant" to a medieval viewer.

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Customer Reviews

In this lively biography of Chartres Cathedral, Ball explores the configuration of cultural and technological factors that enabled Europe to achieve a "liberation from gravity" in the twelfth century, including the rise of scholasticism, Platonic obsessions with light and proportion, and heroic masons who "turned geometry into stone." The accomplishments of Gothic architecture were all the more remarkable given that stonework was virtually forgotten in the West in the centuries after Rome fell. Though much of the history of Chartres Cathedral remains opaque, Ball's account of its construction reveals fascinating details (such as the origins of its blue glass, likely scavenged from Roman or Byzantine sites) and evokes its *raison d'être*: in an era when architecture "existed to reveal the deep design of God's creation," Chartres "encoded a set of symbols and relationships that mapped out the universe itself." Copyright ©2008 Click here to subscribe to The New Yorker

"A lively biography of Chartres Cathedral. . . . Ball's account of its construction reveals fascinating details . . . and evokes its *raison d'être*. (The New Yorker) "There is no better general introduction to the subject... [Ball's] account is

bold and plausible. (Wall Street Journal) "Lively...Ball puts the fun back in medieval scholasticism...seems as much at ease on the medieval building site as in an abbey library. (Los Angeles Times) "A terrific book |A lucid, thoughtful tour de force |A fascinating book with important insights and observations on every page. (Christian Science Monitor) "Anyone who has been thrilled by the great Gothic cathedrals will revel in this study of both the spiritual and architectural qualities of those medieval wonders. (Publishers Weekly (starred review)) "Ball leaves no stone unturned . . . A revelatory look at a seminal period in art history. (Kirkus Reviews)

This book was the first book I ever read by Philip Ball, and it's a part of my permanent keeper collection. I have no recollection as to why I read it in the first place, but as I did so I realized I was listening to a master storyteller of things that I didn't know about. That's a real treat for me - to read an interesting well-written book that clearly outlines something I don't know much about. The main subject, Chartres Cathedral, is well known - PB tells us about why and how it was built, about its' split architecture, the people who built it, and, really, the reasoning that went into it. And the Moorish sources of its' design and how it impacted European thinking. And how Chartres influenced other cathedrals in France, and why the influences were different from Germanic cathedrals built around the same time, and the Norman buildings were different, too! The author ties all these disparate elements together into a seamless, interesting, and very readable book. FEU

This is a serious scholarly study which describes the history, philosophy and architectural aspects of this magnificent cathedral. It probably has more detail concerning individuals who influenced or participated in the decisions, design and its building than is necessary for the average reader, and though interesting, gets laborious. Larger diagrams and better pictures would raise my rating. I enjoyed the book because the author writes well and it is very authoritative. It's descriptions of changing religious and philosophical influences, as well as emphasis on education on the continent, their combined influence on gothic architecture, combine to make this an interesting book.

I've taught an interdisciplinary course entitled "Cathedrals and Other Great Churches of Medieval Europe" a dozen times (twice in England), had Malcolm Miller as a guest lecturer (and tour guide at Chartres in one of my three visits there) and Peter Gibson of the York Minster Stained Glass Workshop as a guest lecturer (and tour guide at York Minster twice), visited more than a hundred medieval and renaissance great churches, and read at least parts of more than half of the books

and articles listed in the seven-page bibliography of this book, and, in my judgment, no other book comes close to this one in providing real insight into understanding the great medieval churches. For my course, I used a reader I developed comprising excerpts from dozens of different books to give my students the breadth of ideas, opinions and knowledge needed to understand these great churches. Like many other compilations it suffered from wide variations in the "voices" of the various authors and from unevenness in coverage of the diverse subjects that students needed to grasp the significance of these monuments. I dreamed that some day I would have the time and energy to assemble a coherent anthology -- maybe one with a title like: "Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Medieval Churches . . ." but, alas, retirement reared its ugly head and the motivation to do so disappeared. Now, however, Philip Ball has fulfilled my dream, and although he has done so in the context of a single great church, much of what he has written is applicable to most of them. His book makes me wish I hadn't retired so I could use it as a text. Not every reader will understand all of the nuances of the many subjects Ball covers in this book, but every reader with any interest in medieval churches will find this wonderfully well-written book to be not only a fascinating read but also a great addition to his or her library.

In the 1950s, when I was first studying Gothic architecture, the emphasis was on form; successive changes in shape and pattern. Banister Fletcher's tome, "A History of Architecture on the comparative method" was our reference source and the excellent illustrations reinforced the formal message. When I first taught the subject, in the 1970s, I felt that there should be much more understanding of the context in which architecture comes into being. I put emphasis on economic, social and technical issues as well as the formal ones. Philip Ball's excellent book takes a similar approach though there is relatively little discussion of the economic context, upon which I would have placed greater emphasis. On the other hand, Ball devotes a significant section to the philosophical context in the Middle Ages. Ball is not an architectural historian, but he has read widely and distilled a wide range of knowledge about the great cathedrals of the 12th and 13th centuries, while always focussing on that much-cited masterpiece, Chartres. My previous acquaintance with the author was through his book "Critical Mass, How one thing leads to another". It is a heavyweight - literally - book of close to 600 pages and, although quite readable, it demands careful reading. "Universe of Stone" is not like that. It demands much less of the reader without in any way being a shallow interpretation. The illustrations, many of them in colour, are excellent. Dr Ball clearly shares my admiration for the masons responsible for the great edifice and goes to considerable length to show exactly why that admiration is well founded. I thoroughly enjoyed the book and I recommend it

highly.

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