

Book Reviews

Maile S. Hutterer, *Framing the Church: The Social and Artistic Power of Buttresses in French Gothic Architecture* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2019), 224 pp. incl. 105 b&w ills, ISBN 9780271083445, £92.95 doi:10.1017/arh.2023.14

Reviewed by LINDSAY S. COOK

Central to the history of gothic architecture, flying buttresses have long fascinated architectural historians of medieval France. Maile S. Hutterer's new study of flying buttresses in the high and late medieval French royal domain will surprise readers familiar with the genre from publications by scholars including Marcel Aubert, Robert Bork, William Clark, John Fitchen, Jacques Henriot, Jacques Heyman, Eugène Lefèvre-Pontalis, Robert Mark, Stephen Murray, Philippe Plagnieux, Anne Prache, Andrew Tallon, Arnaud Timbert and Marvin Trachtenberg. After offering a concise historiographic overview in the introduction, Hutterer avoids joining the fray as she subsequently sets aside the structural role of flying buttresses to focus instead on their aesthetics, social functions, sculptural articulation and symbolism.

The first chapter concentrates on the fundamental importance of the look of flying buttresses. Hutterer argues not only that 'extrastructural concerns' could motivate their use, but even that designers and builders were willing to accept a certain amount of 'structural risk for aesthetic gain', as in the case of the structurally dubious openwork flyers of Troyes Cathedral serving as a model for those of the nearby church of Saint-Jean-au-Marché. In addition to examining the aesthetic role of flying buttresses through case studies in Troyes and Le Mans, Hutterer analyses microarchitectural versions and two-dimensional representations of the same, showing that they serve as frames rather than as mimetic depictions of the 'structural dynamics' of French gothic flying buttresses.

The second chapter demonstrates that flying buttresses produced a new kind of liminal space and considers how institutions managed these interstitial zones. The author argues that the spaces along the flanks of Chartres and Reims cathedrals, for example, were exploited commercially, whereas the interstices of Paris and Laon cathedrals were not, thus arguably paving the way for their appropriation and conversion into chantry chapels. Indeed, relying largely on graphic representations, Hutterer demonstrates that the spaces between flying buttresses served a wide variety of social functions, both sacred and secular. And yet, the author dispenses perhaps too hastily with the possibility that a great church's nooks and crannies might also, on occasion, have been put to nefarious use. Sebastiano Serlio, in his book about ecclesiastical architecture published in Paris in 1547 as Book V of his architectural treatise, insists that 'abuses of various sorts always occur in corners' and cautions that 'corners always attract a great deal of wickedness'. His recommendation that corners should, therefore, be enclosed with a low wall parallels the

longstanding practice of adding chapels between buttresses, thereby smoothing out the previously corrugated outer walls, as at Paris, Laon and Amiens cathedrals.

The third chapter analyses monumental buttress sculpture. Hutterer argues that ecclesiastical institutions deployed monumental sculpture 'as representations of ecclesiology and liturgical practice, to assert their authority'. This interpretation of the clerical, likely episcopal, figures on the buttresses of the north flank of Chartres Cathedral and the angelic procession surrounding the chevet of Reims Cathedral is compelling. However, it is less convincing for the sculpture of the Saint-Quentin superstructure. This is not just due to the poor state of preservation of the figures, but also because the author does not engage with recent scholarly literature about medieval musical imagery and hence the identification of the apparently wingless figures as angels, and the claim that the programme represents a paraliturgical procession, both seem premature.

The fourth and final chapter opens with a discussion of Narbonne cathedral as a kind of architectural contradiction, combining sturdy elements closely associated with military architecture and delicate fields of stained glass. Building on the work of Stephen Gardner, Hutterer compares select churches to castles in the French royal domain before turning her attention to the 'confluence between the buttressing frame and the defensible curtain wall'. In the author's view, the similarity between the two suggests an overlap between literal and spiritual defence. Moreover, the gargoyles adorning the buttresses of ecclesiastical edifices served an apotropaic function and reinforced 'the defensive associations of buttressing-frame systems'.

Overall, the book both re-treads familiar terrain and breaks new ground, but it does have some minor idiosyncrasies. Because the term 'flying buttress' technically refers only to the flyer and not to the whole structural system — consisting of a buttress, an upright and a flyer — Hutterer coins the term 'buttressing-frame system', a neologism used so frequently that readers may find it distracting, particularly when a viable alternative such as 'flying-buttress system' already exists. Moreover, readers less familiar with the history of any given great church may find it difficult to put some of the author's findings into context. How, for example, does the monumental buttress sculpture at Chartres relate to the rest of the cathedral's sculptural programme or, indeed, its broader architectural history? Largely geared, therefore, towards specialists, the book (which is based on the author's 2011 doctoral thesis) is beautifully produced. It is also profusely illustrated, in many cases with photographs taken by the author, although even the specialist reader may find the lack of dates in the image captions frustrating.

Throughout the book, Hutterer marshals new visual evidence and familiar primary sources to ascribe a dizzying array of symbolic meanings to flying-buttress systems, both in whole and in part. Possibilities range from 'a vision of Heavenly Jerusalem or symbol of God's power more generally', to 'suggesting the grace of God', signalling 'a building's protective qualities, the seigneurial power of the institution, and the church's connection to the heavenly city', to symbolising 'consecrated ground'. As Hutterer observes, 'it was the exterior of the church that most people saw most of the time', and *Framing the Church* will undoubtedly lead readers to gaze up at this liminal space with fresh eyes.

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