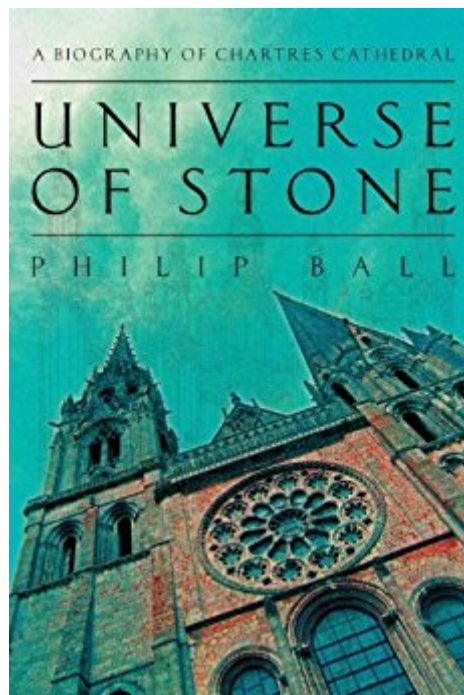




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# Universe Of Stone: Chartres Cathedral And The Invention Of The Gothic



## Synopsis

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 was it built at such immense height and with such glorious play of light, in the soaring manner we now call Gothic? In this eminently fascinating work, author Philip Ball makes sense of the visual and emotional power of Chartres and brilliantly explores how its construction—and the creation of other Gothic cathedrals—represented a profound and dramatic shift in the way medieval thinkers perceived their relationship with their world. Beautifully illustrated and written, filled with astonishing insight, *Universe of Stone* embeds the magnificent cathedral in the culture of the twelfth century—its schools of philosophy and science, its trades and technologies, its politics and religious debates—enabling us to view this ancient architectural marvel with fresh eyes.

## Book Information

File Size: 2761 KB

Print Length: 340 pages

Page Numbers Source ISBN: 0061154296

Publisher: HarperCollins e-books (March 17, 2009)

Publication Date: March 17, 2009

Sold by: Amazon HarperCollins Publishers

Language: English

ASIN: B001ANYCW8

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Not Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #277,466 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #5

in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Arts & Photography > Architecture > Building Types & Styles > Religious Buildings #19 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Arts & Photography > Art > Art History > Regional > European #39 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Arts & Photography > Architecture > History & Periods

## Customer 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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