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**Introduction**

The enormous production of church buildings in Central Europe during the late Middle Ages was fuelled chiefly by the competitive civic pride of the region's burgeoning towns, and as a result the main focus of creative effort was the urban parish church rather than the cathedral or monastic church.

It seems legitimate to associate the matter-of-fact directness of the normative type, the hall church, with the practical tenor of town life, although increasingly often during the 14th century the hall format was adopted by majoi ecclesiastical corporations whose counterparts elsewliere in Northern Europe would automatically have built great churches.

Austerely detailed basilicas in the Freiburg-im-Breisgau mould continued to find favour, especially with the friars, and, like hall churches, they could be executed on the largest scale The hall choirs of a few exceptionally ambitious parish chinches incorporated some of the trappings of great church Gofhic.

Impoitanc examples are the radiating chapels at Schwabisch Gmund in Swabia (begun 1351), based on the chapels added from с. 1300 to the chevet of Nofre-Dame in Paris, and the external elevations of the choir of St Sebald at Nuremberg (begun 1361), which incoiporate traceried gables and image-lined buttresses worthy of any Rayonmant cathedral.

**Central Europe, the late Gothic**

The one l4th-century church in Central Europe which adopted the French great church system more or less complete is Prague Cathedral. This stylistic allegiance can be ascribed without hesitation to the patrons, the Luxemburg dynasty of Bohemian kings, allies of the French royal house in family, politics and culture.

Under King John (1310-46) and his son, the Emреrоr Charles IV (1346-78). Prague was transformed into a Central European Paris, complete with a university, the first in the Empire north of the Alps.

Its centrepiece was the cathedral which, like Henry Ill's Westminster Abbey, stood beside the main royal palace and combined the functions of Reims (coronation church), St-Dems (royal mausoleum) and the Sainte-Chapelle (relic cult glorifying the monarchy).

Prague was less directly the personal creation of the ruler than Westminster only in the sense that the administration of the works remained in clerical hands, tor Сharles IV spared no effort to ensure that the new cathedral would be an effective symbol of the enhanced power and prestige of Bohemia.

In 1341, when Charles was already co-regent, a tenth of the very large royal revenues from the Bohemian silver mines was granted to the chapter specifically to meet the costs of building; in 1344 Charles personally negofiated with the pope the caiving out of an archdiocese of Prague from that of Mainz; in 1355 he acquired relies of the cathedral's patron, St Vitus; and by 1358 he had remade the shrine for the relics of St Wenceslas - like Edward the Сonfessor, a canonized representative of the previous indigenous dynasty

The clearest indication of Charles's interest in the building itself is that while engaged in discussions with the pope at Avignon, he recruited the architect Matthew of Arras.

Matthew died in 1352 when the ambulatory and radiating chapels were complete and the stiaight bays had been begun. His work is in an elegant Rayonnant manner strongly influenced by the late 13th-century parts of Narbonne. The pivofal position of Prague in the history of German Late Gofhic is due not to Matthew but to Peter Parler, who took over in 1356 at the extraordinarily young age of twenty-three.

Parlei completed tile sacristy on the north side of the choir in 1362, the south transept porch in 1368, the arcade level of the choir by 1370 and the upper levels by 1385. Work on the great tower west of the south transept continued until c. 1420, when the Hussite revolution halted church building throughout Bohemia.

The nave, whose foundation stone was laid in 1392, remained unbuilt until the early 20th century.

The acceptability of the youthful Parler in Prague had no doubt much to do with his being a member of a well-established family of architects active in the Rhineland and Swabia. His father Heinrich was probably architect of the choir of Schwabisch Gmund. His first work at Prague, the sacristy, shows him to have been abreast of the most advanced developments in German architecture.

Its two square bays are covered by vaults from which are suspended, with the aid of concaled ironwork, open conoids of ribs not unlike, the spokes of an umbrella. There can be little doubt that the main inspiration for these pendant vaults was the larger octagonal vaults which, until their failure and replacement in the mid-16th century, covered the two-bay chapel of St Catherine on the south side of Strashourg Cathedral (begun c. 1338). It is almost certain that the Strasbourg pendants anticipated Prague's omission of webs, but the possibility exists that they resembled the considerable numbers of early 13th-century.

The earliest German rib vaults without webs are those in the west tower at Freiburg Minster and the 'Tonsur' chapel in the cloister at Magdeburg Cathedral, both of c. 1310-30.

Similar but smaller vaults had been used slightly earlier in England, in the vestibule to the sacristy of St Angustine's, Bristol (begun 1298) and in the Easter Sepulechre at Lincoln Cathedral (c. 1290-1300).

If this were the only correspondence between German and English vault design of the late 13th and early 14th centuries it could be dismissed as coincidence, but in fact there are many German vaults besides those оf the Prague sacristy which can readily be understood as variaitions on earlier English designs.

The plan of the ribs in the centre of the vault over the eastern sacristy bay at Prague is a tour-point star. This design and the eight-point stars of the Strasbourg vaults were among the more spectacular manifestations of a longstanding and widespread.

Continental interest in the stellar vaults used in English circular and polygonal chapter houses from the late 12th century onwards.

One of the earliest signs of this interest is a plan of c. 1230 in the 'sketchbook' of Villard de Honnecourt showing a square chapter house covered by a simplified version of the vaulting scheme exemplified by the mid-13th-century chapter house at Westminster.

Some of the material in the Villard sketchbook suggests close connections with the Cistercians, whose international and centralized organization provided ideal channels for transmitting information about English chapter houses to the Continent. It is likely that this is what actually happened, for the revival of interest in the centrally planned chapter house at the end of the 12th century took place under the auspices of the Cistercians of south-west England and Wales, and some of the earliest Central European star vaults are found in Cistercian chapter houses or strongly Сistercian-influenced buildings.

Unlike the Enghsh designers, who admired the proto-fan vault character which the profusion of ribs in chapter houses gives to the central conoid, the Сentral Europeans found various ways of emphasizing the autonomy of the constituent Y shapes or triradials, a formation used in the Rhineland from с. 1220 onwards. The most favoured way of doing this, the omission of radial ribs linking angles and centre, is anticipated in the Villard plan.

The Prague vault is the first outside England to imitate the curious Wells trick of splitting foliage bosses to reveal rib junctions. An important aspect of the pattern applied to the surface of the tunnel appears to have been anticipated in Parler's own Old Town Tower on the Charles Bridge in Prague.

The vault here is a pointed tunnel without penetrations, each of whose curved planes is overland by a pattern of ribs almost identical in plan to those of the vault of the transpert porch at the cathedral, except that the bounding triangles are omitted so as to leave only triradials, a usage widespread in Central Europe by this date.

Like some early 14th-century German multistellar vaults, it can also be read partly as a series of large intersecting triradials straddling two bays.

The high vault of the cathedral choir is the first in Central Eurоре whose ribs consist entirely of intersecting triradials extending across the full width of each compartment. The concept was not altogether new, however, for there exists one south-western English example of its application dating from c. 1340, namely the series of small tunnel vaults inside the screen to the Lady Chapel at Ottery St Mary in Devon.

The penetrations of these vaults are on the longitudinal rather than the transverse axis, but if Parler really was aware of Ottery he could not have failed to note that the rib pattern of the screen vaults is excerpted from the vault of the Lady Chapel itself, where the arrangement of penetrations is as at Prague.

The Lady Chapel vault at Ottery also anticipates Prague's continuous patterning of lozenges at the vault crown, as well as the heavy longitudinal stress winch the patterning imparts to the basic tunnel.

In Central Europe the Prague choir vault came as a relevation and more or less immediately assumed the status of fountainhead of a tradition of large-scale vault design which was to flourish spectaculary throughout the next century the a hall.

The main elevations at Pngue are a version of the French Ravonnant formula whose strong lines function as a kind of showcase for the display of a series of brilliantly original decorative set pieces.

Of neccessity, the arcade storey had to be completed in general accordance with Matthew of Arras's design, although in the west bays, which are entirely Parler's work, the high vault responds are thickened.

Comparison of the upper storeys with those of Cologne, which Parler undoubtedly knew, shows that he was prepared to make some fairly radical departures from Rayomant precedent for the sake of ensuring that the elevations complemented the high tunnel - vault in emphasizing the unity of the choir as a longitudinal space. The main devices which promote this reading are the heavy horizontals of the triforium parapet and the strange angled projections of the clearstorey sills, which almost cut through the western high vault responds and which actually do sever most of the thin responds inherited from Matthew’s Bicades.

The partial cutting was no doubt the effect preferred by Parler, bvit the complete cutting inust have been acceptable to him both for itself and because Ins father had used something very similar in the ambulatory at Schwabisch Gmund. At Prague the angled sill projections register as being a subordinate part of an even stranger feature, the angled clearstorey liglits and trifonuni openings.

The pretext for tins angling was the positioning of the internal triforiuni passage and external clearstorey passage so liard up behind the high vault icsponds as to preclude a normal junction between the responds and the triloiium arcade and clearstorey tracery. (Both paiisages were blocked in the lyth century because they weie lield to endanger the structural stability ol the choir, and in the 20th centmy doors to a new walkway passing behind the buttresses were tormed in the adjacent parts of the triforium windows.)

The extra width of the tritonum arcade openings next to the vault responds allows a good view tioni giound level nof merely of the entrances to the tritonum passage but ol the celebrated sculptured busts which sin mount them.

Painted inscriptions formerly identified the busts as the family of Сharles IV, the successive archbishops and clerical building administrators, and the two architects of the choir.

The scheme as a whole is unique, although parallels for the use of figure sculpture above passage entiances arе in the choirs of Sees and St Augustine's, Bristol.

In fact, the upper choir elevations seem to be as much indebted to south-western English sources as the high vault, for the only antecedents of the angled lights of the clearstorey are the iimilarly fimaled entrance's to the Wells clearstorey passage, and the recessed spandrels above the сlearstorey openings are evidently based on those over the east window at Wells.

Above the angled lights at Prague there is nof solid masonn, as at Wells, but single glared lights winch serve to make the tracers heads unitonn in width and height with those in ilie nairow apse windows.

Possibly Parler knew the similar arrangement in the mid-13th-century Rayomant choir of Leon.

The actual tracery patterns used at Prague letlect the influence of English fleiwing designs merely in a general way, for they are the most original Continental tracery of the 14th century. The only clearly identifiable borrowings are from Swabian sources, notably the windows of с. 1330-47 in the nave at Schwabisch Gmund (the strange 'melting' of one form into anofhci in the inteinal in the external parapets) and the east window of с. 1335 at Bebenhausen Abbey the cusping of the large circle in the right-hand window in 168 which impinges on some of the forms it encloses).

There is some irony Parler's indebtedness to English Gothic, for King John of Bohemia died fighting on the French side at Greecy in 1346, and Edward 111 had lent his support to Сharles IV's main rival for the imperial crown, Louis of Bavaria.

Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of the architect rather than the patron it would have been quite natural to take cognizance of the achievements of the most creative tradition of 14th-century cathedral Gothic, especially as Prague was a one-of rather than die product of an established German tradition of great church architecture.

Awareness of English Gofhic in the Rhineland and Swabia went back to the late 13th century when the masons of Strasbourg Cathedral recorded their decision to adopt the craft organization of the English masons.

German political horizons had long encompassed England, if only as a counterweight to France, and when Parler arrived in Prague in 1356 Edward III's victories over the French had raised English prestige in Europe to its highest level during the Middle Ages.

Nevertheless, it has to be emphasized that Parler's borrowings from the Decorated style were integrated into a design which is not English either in its basic premises or its detailed handling, for in the late Middle Ages no single nation could exercise cultural leadership in Europe in the way that France liad done during the 13th century.

How Parler was able to learn about English Decorated is nof known.

A study tour during apprenticeship is possible, for these are documented in late medieval Germany, but it may be that some kind of agreement existed which enabled architectural information in the guise of drawings to circulate among the main cathedral lodges.

Around 1350 the Strasbourg lodge obtained plans of the choirs of Notre-Dame in Paris and Orleans Cathedral, but it is not known how or by what route they came.

The influence of Parler's net vaults and complex tracery endured in Central Europe as long as Gothic architecture itself, and by around 1500 the Parler family had become known as the 'Junckherrn' (squires) of Prague and had acquired the mythical status of founders of German masonic practice. Yet the Prague choir did not start a spate of cathedral building. At Augsburg a grand new Rayonnant chevet begun after the bishop visited Prague in 1354 was finished off lamely in the late 14th century. At the minster of Freiburg-im-Breisgau, the main town in the Black Forest region, a cathedral-like choir was begun in 1354 by Peter Parlor's brofher Johann, but a quarrel between the town and the ruler of the surrounding area soon brought work to a standstill.

Other institutions which might have been expected to build a great church were content with much simpler schemes. A case in point is Aachen Minster, where the new choir added after the formal designation of the dimivh as the coronation place of future German kings in 1356 was essentially an enlarged version of the Sainte-Chapelle. That it was not a German Reims must have been partly due to the wish to preserve Charlemagne's venerable 9th-century Palatine Chapel, but it also reflects the lesser importance of the imperial office in the late Middle Ages compared to what it had been until 1250.

On the relatively rare occasions when major church building was patornized by the territorial princes, the real rulers of late medieval Germany, the outcome was invariably a hall church.

The best of 15th-century Germany's great church buildings are the nave of the Benedictine abbey church of SS. Ulrich and Afra in Augsburg, rebuilt 1494-1500 following a tire, and the continuation of the Freiburg choir from 1471 by Hans Niesenberger.

Freiburg provides an exemplar of many of the stylistic traits of the latest phase of German Gofhic, although it was not a building of the seminal importance of Prague. As in the major hall churches, the emphasis is firmly on rich and complex vaulting. The central vessel has a net vault which must be numbered among the vast progeny of the high vault at Prague, although its close and even mesh of ribs is typical of late 15th- and 16th-century designs.

The ambulatory vault is quite different and exemplifies the restless, organic quality of much 15th-ceimiry German Gofhic in its sprawling and irregular-looking rib patterns, its tangled and capital-less springings, its limited use of skeletal ribs and its overshof rib junctions suggestive of branches lashed together.

This last element is used inconspicuously in the high vault at Prague, but at Freiburg and the manу ofher late 15th-century churches where it is echoed in the cusping of the window tracery it almost becomes the *leimotiv* of the interior.

The ultimate development of the idea, the naturalistic rendering of untrimmed branches, did not impinge on great church architecture as such, although it can be seen on fittings and ancillary structures, for example the nave pulpit and the chapel of St Lawrence at Strasbourg. It is not at all clear what specific meanings, if any, were attached to this quasi-vegetal strain of Gofhic.

**Conclusion**

It seems legitimate to associate the matter-of-fact directness of the normative type, the hall church, with the practical tenor of town life, although increasingly often during the 14th century the hall format was adopted by majoi ecclesiastical corporations whose counterparts elsewliere in Northern Europe would automatically have built great churches.

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