

## The First Stone

'If this monument is one day finished, no other will ever compare.'

Robert de Thorigny<sup>1</sup>

**I**n the middle of the twelfth century, Paris was a capital city on the cusp of a phenomenal economic, political, territorial, intellectual and artistic expansion. It was about to enter 150 years of continuous growth and development of the kind it wouldn't see again, to this day. And it was during this most auspicious time that Notre-Dame cathedral was built.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the renaissance of cities between the tenth and the thirteenth centuries, only fifteen percent of the population were city-dwellers. Towns were therefore of a modest size: Marseilles had 10,000 inhabitants, Lyons 20,000. In fact, the most populous European cities could be found in Flanders and Italy: Ghent had 64,000 inhabitants, Florence 100,000 and both Milan and Venice, beacons of Christendom, as many as 200,000, compared to just 40,000 in London.

However, Paris achieved the feat of being by far the most populated city in the Western world, even in a kingdom that was mostly rural. With 270,000 inhabitants<sup>3</sup> living in a space of less than 400 hectares,<sup>4</sup> it was the city incarnate.

Paris was the capital of France, but what was France? At the end of the twelfth century the French royal domain was the shape of a *bandelette*, a narrow strip of the lushest farmland extending from the northern town of Amiens to Bourges in the south, with Paris at its epicentre. However, after a series of wars of conquest, by 1204 King Philip II, also known as Philip Augustus, had acquired for France a multitude of new territories: Normandy, Maine, Anjou, Touraine, Poitou and the rest of the Plantagenet lands down to the south-western town of Bordeaux on the Atlantic coast. In 1229 the Languedoc was ceded to the Count of Toulouse, who was a vassal to the king, while in 1285 Champagne was bought by royal decree. A few years later, Lyons and its surrounding area increased the size of France further.<sup>5</sup>

While other European cities usually fulfilled one or two functions (Ghent was an industrial centre, Bologna a university town, Venice a commercial power), Paris represented them all. First, it had a thriving economic life thanks to its many specialized artisans. In 1268 *Le Livre des métiers*, kept by the provost of Paris, Étienne Boileau, registered 900 different kinds of professional activity.<sup>6</sup> The very powerful drapers' trade, for instance, employed an army of skilled workers: wool-shearers, combers, carders, spinners, weavers, dyers and of course drapers themselves. And if you worked in wool you were not allowed to touch cotton or silk, two other trades that were as closely regulated.

Traders and merchants, especially in wheat, wine and wool, formed a particularly powerful group which held a monopoly on commerce using the River Seine.

Both royal and episcopal powers understood very quickly that they should work closely with those rich bourgeois.<sup>7</sup> Most of the manorial lords decided at this time to shift their place of residence to the city, where the products of their estates converged; merchants would then sell them on behalf of the lords. In a time of territorial conquests and economic growth, they all had an interest in joining forces. When he left for the Third Crusade in 1190,<sup>8</sup> Philip II pointedly chose to delegate the collection of royal taxes in his absence to seven such rich Parisian bourgeois, not to aristocratic relatives. Ten years later, Philip recruited more of them to help with both the administration and financial management of his recent territorial conquests, among them Normandy and the Languedoc. Thanks to their shrewd intendants, those annexations doubled the royal fortune and made France the wealthiest kingdom in Europe.<sup>9</sup>

An economic powerhouse, with a skilful bourgeoisie at its heart growing ever more prosperous, Paris was also a religious centre, the seat of the diocese. On the Île de la Cité the all-powerful bishops of Paris lived in the episcopal palace, with hundreds of priests and canons to assist them in their duties. One of those was education. Paris quickly became renowned as a European centre of excellence with its prestigious episcopal schools and newly established universities. Throngs of young clerks and students flocked from the provinces of Normandy and Picardy and neighbouring regions such as England, Scandinavia, the Germanic lands, Flanders and Italy to the Île de la Cité to

acquire an education. The poorest went to live south of the Seine, on what was not yet known as the Left Bank, where they could get cheaper rents. This student contingent, young, boisterous and male, represented ten percent of Paris's population, as compared with only two percent in the rest of the country. Prostitution was therefore tolerated, in order to protect the young women of the bourgeoisie from such a demographic imbalance and promiscuity. Paris didn't boast municipal brothels, but prostitutes could be found in any good tavern.

These students did not live secluded from the world. They were part of the times they lived in. Nearly all belonged to the Church; they were tonsured clerics, subject to the bishop's jurisdiction. Learning was a religious act but the mission for which their education was preparing them was an active one, and a secular, pastoral one. It was a verbal mission. They were to spread the Word – the knowledge of God – among the laymen.<sup>10</sup>

The ranks of students were very mobile and either swelled or melted away, depending on the quality of the master concerned. By 1150 Paris had overtaken Laon, Chartres and Saint-Denis. Its victory owed much to the glory that graced Abelard, the most brilliant teacher of his day. Bolder, more independent-minded masters – whose audacity attracted greater numbers of students – rented stalls on rue du Fouarre and the Petit Pont, both a stone's throw from the future cathedral. South of the Seine a whole new district, devoted entirely to study, was growing opposite the Île de la Cité.

Finally, Paris had regained its former status as the kingdom's capital city, originally bestowed by Clovis, the founder of the Merovingian dynasty, in the late fifth century. When Philip II

gave it a strong, enclosing wall in 1190, capable of defending the royal treasury and the royal archives, which he had recently moved there, Paris officially imposed itself as the royal residence of choice. ‘Paris was the king’s city, the first city in medieval Europe to become what Rome had long since ceased to be: a genuine capital. Paris became the capital not of an empire, not of a certain Christendom, but of a kingdom, of *the* kingdom.’<sup>11</sup>

Little by little, Paris acquired a fourfold vocation: as the royal city, the merchant city, the bishop’s city and the university city. ‘In the narrow lanes where the schools sprang up a new spirit was born.’<sup>12</sup>

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One has to immerse oneself in the daily life of the Île de la Cité from 1150 to 1300 to understand the extraordinary achievement that was the construction of Notre-Dame on the site of an already existing and functioning cathedral, which had just been renovated. The Île de la Cité, with its 15,000 inhabitants (compared to barely 1,000 today), was not just bustling with people; it was crowded with small dwellings separated only by very narrow streets in the middle of which lay both rubbish and excrement. The rich and the destitute lived alongside each other, and larger houses stood next to decrepit lodgings. The square outside the ancient cathedral was filled with the bric-à-brac of shops and stalls, the cries of street sellers and the pungent smells of fish or meat cut, boned and sold on open-air blocks. Fairs and markets were regular features, the two most popular events being, on 8 September, the onion and flower market, and roughly

six months later, on the last day of Lent, the colourful ham fair, which sometimes required the chapter bailiff to intervene:

In this parvis where one can contemplate  
the face of a superb temple  
A forest of hams grow from all sides  
as if they had been planted.<sup>13</sup>

Religious processions took place very regularly too, for instance whenever natural catastrophes occurred, such as floods or heavy rains. In this case, the shrine of Saint Genevieve, patron saint of Paris, was exhibited for everyone to see and supplicate to.

The square in front of the ancient cathedral was a theatre in all the meanings of the term. From the permanent gibbet sometimes hung a criminal sentenced to death by the bishop, who had judicial authority on his patch of land. Sometimes a platform was raised so that the *mystères* (mystery plays), could be performed.

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Who financed the construction of Notre-Dame de Paris and, more generally, the whole urban redesign of the Île de la Cité? The short answer is that nobody knows for certain. Only a handful of accounting documents survive. Historians interested in the question went hunting for traces of donations for the construction and decoration of the cathedral by studying the chartularies and obituaries of independent archives,<sup>14</sup> and drew their conclusions from them.

It appears that everyone, from poor Parisians up to the king and his entourage, made donations for the construction of Notre-Dame or contributed to it in one way or another throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. However, the bulk of the money seems to have come from one man, Bishop Maurice de Sully, through his large episcopal incomes, which he appears to have used almost entirely for this huge urban project. Those incomes were vast. The bishops owned the best land in a 50-kilometre radius around the Île de la Cité, and their enormous granaries were filled to the rafters with the tithes payable on every harvest. They also controlled the city, exploiting its markets and fairs and collecting many kinds of taxes, such as that imposed on every transaction done in Les Halles, already its trading centre and principal market.<sup>15</sup> Hence they profited directly from both the land and trade. More funds for Notre-Dame's construction could also be raised quickly by the sale of some of the diocese's properties: after all, it owned two-thirds of the whole Parisian real estate.

According to the monk Anchin, well known at the time for his chronicles, Maurice de Sully used 'his own funds rather than those of others'.<sup>16</sup> The son of peasants, Sully had no personal wealth and it was only through careful and astute management of his episcopal incomes that he could raise the necessary sums to finance his architectural projects.

Evidence of Sully's dedication and generosity is shown, in his will, by the large donation of 1,000 livres to pay for the lead for the new cathedral's roof.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, two of his successors also proved most generous: Jean de Paris and Simon Matifas de Buci, the bishops who supervised the end of the construction

and some reconstruction in the early fourteenth century. In his will in 1270, Jean de Paris left enough money to cover the final work on the transepts,<sup>18</sup> while Simon Matifas de Buci invested more than 5,000 livres between 1298 and 1304 in the creation of three axial chapels.<sup>19</sup>

Donations could take many forms: for instance, the establishment of chantries, or trust funds to employ priests to sing Masses for the souls of the recently departed, sometimes the donors themselves. Many rich bourgeois working for the French king, like Jean Sarrazin, Louis IX's chamberlain, set up numerous generous chantries at different Parisian churches and at Notre-Dame.<sup>20</sup> When chapels were built inside the cathedral, the bourgeois of Paris not only funded the creation of thirty-six chantries, one per chapel, but largely funded the building of each of those chapels.<sup>21</sup> Of course, the donations hardly covered the cost of the construction of the building itself; however, their existence shows that, as Sully had urged them to in his sermons,<sup>22</sup> the Parisian bourgeois must have contributed hard cash towards it – as an investment both in their felicity on earth and, more pointedly, in the peace of their souls after death. They had benefited so much from the continuous economic growth that they could lavishly donate to their new cathedral and also to other churches in Paris.<sup>23</sup> 'Rich laymen always made large donations because they were concerned about their souls,' wrote the French historian Georges Duby.<sup>24</sup>

The poorest also contributed significantly to the construction of Notre-Dame, not exactly willingly, but through hardship and making sacrifices. The 2,000 serfs who worked the bishop's lands had to pay the *taille* (land tax) levied on them by the



Church whenever it pleased. Between 1210 and 1232, that is to say at the time of the construction of Notre-Dame's façade, the serfs were forced to pay the *taille* five times, every four and a half years. The pressure was such that some dissident canons, fearing what they saw as a legitimate revolt, demanded that the serfs be exempted for the next twenty years.<sup>25</sup> And they were right. In 1233 the burghers of Rheims rose up against the excessive taxes levied by another church-building prelate; they forced him to halt the work for a time and to lay off the masons and image-carvers.<sup>26</sup>

However, the major role played by those hard-working peasants was fully recognized by all, particularly by the builders and stone-carvers. An image of the oxen used in ploughing, carved in stone, crowned the towers of Laon cathedral; and depictions of farmers' labour at different seasons appeared on the capitals of all cathedrals. It was only right to honour them in that way, for it was their labour that allowed the edifices to rise, little by little. 'Each workman, each farmer was a conqueror, and the cathedral itself meted out praise to him.'<sup>27</sup>

What about Louis VII, king of France from 1137 to 1180? Did he contribute significantly to the initial construction of Notre-Dame? Not so much, in fact. It was only with his son, Philip II (r. 1180–1223), whom Bishop de Sully baptised in 1165, that Paris became of real importance to the French monarchy. Louis VII was more interested in financing Cistercian monasteries than new cathedrals. And if Philip II too did not contribute much to the actual construction, the progress of which he could monitor from his royal palace on the Île de la Cité, he invested massively in the defence of his capital and his

kingdom by erecting walls on the right and left banks of the Seine and fortresses such as the Louvre.

In fact, Philip II contributed greatly to the emergence of Notre-Dame cathedral, even before it was finished, as a symbol of power. In a very unusual move he chose it as the burial site of his wife, Isabella of Hainault, who died in childbirth on 12 May 1190.<sup>28</sup> Her grave was found on 19 February 1858 during the restoration works of Eugène Viollet-le-Duc. Buried alongside Isabella was her silver seal matrix.<sup>29</sup> That the king of France should choose to bury his wife in Paris's new cathedral with her seal matrix unbroken proved an exceptional event. Until then, no church competed with Saint-Denis-en-France for royal patronage. Since the time of Dagobert in the seventh century, Clovis's successors had chosen Saint-Denis as their burial place, and there the three dynasties which governed the kingdom of France in succession had continued to bury their dead. Charles Martel, Pepin the Short and Charles the Bald lay in the royal tomb near Dagobert and his sons, near Hugh Capet, close to his ancestors, the dukes of France, and his descendants, the kings.

However, Notre-Dame cathedral slowly started to rise in royal importance. Sons of kings began to be buried there, such as Henri II's son Geoffrey, duke of Brittany, and in 1218 Louis VIII's son Philip, count of Boulogne. And if Louis IX (r. 1226–70) put a temporary end to the ascendancy of Notre-Dame in royal ceremonies, favouring Saint-Denis and Rheims, it was, however, deemed impossible to ignore Notre-Dame when his coffin was brought back from the Crusades in 1271 and paused in front of the cathedral. From the time of