

Essay Question: Was the evolution of the Gothic style in architecture primarily driven by the technological innovations or new ideological currents?

This essay argues that Gothic architecture was evolved mainly by the ideological currents rather than the technological innovations of its time. A new form of art or a new form of construction is highly related and parallel to the technological innovations of its period, it's a fact. However the characteristic of Gothic architecture is much deeper than a technological change in style. It is related to history. It is related to a period of time, which has its roots way back in the fall of the Roman Empire and the battles against Goths. Mainly the argument in this essay is based on three key points to explain why the evolution of Gothic architecture is primarily driven by new ideological currents; The Romanesque culture before Gothic, the social misery of Europe after the Fall of Roman Empire and the effect of the following trade and industry ages.

Art in the earlier middle ages was essentially religious. Since church had the ultimate authority over everything, art was no exception. So all forms of art in Medieval ages found life in churches and the medieval architecture shaped the image of churches forever. The architectural identity of medieval ages (in Europe) is mainly Gothic and Romanesque. The relation between Romanesque and Gothic has a great role in shaping character of Gothic style. "When it is asserted that Gothic architecture is of Romanesque, descent a truth is insisted upon in paradoxical language, for the name 'Romanesque' implies Roman or Greek origin, whereas the name 'Gothic' was applied as a term of reproach to any building whose style was neither classical pure and simple, nor akin to classical art."¹ In fact, no historical source can be definitely sure of why it was called Gothic. Among many different approaches, two of them are stronger than any other. One approach is the defeat of Roman Empire against Goths and Vandals. One can say this is highly relevant to the architectural transitions from Romanesque to Gothic. "The ancient Greek and Roman architecture answered all the perfections required in a faultless and accomplished building; and that the Goths and Vandals demolished these, and introduced their stead a certain fantastical and licentious manner of building; congestions of heavy, dark, melancholy, monkish piles, without any just proportion, use, or beauty; utterly devoid of all true and just symmetry, regular proportion, union, and disposition."² The transition from Romanesque to Gothic is very heavy and dark indeed. It is the perfect reflection of the defeat of the mighty Roman Empire and the fear it caused. When Roman Empire was overthrown by Goths, literally world was in chaos. The ultimate ruling power was down and uncertainty and misery were everywhere. Even before "The Battle of Adrianople on 9 August AD 378, it was the beginning of the end for the Roman Empire. Was the Roman Empire weakening, then the barbarians were on the rise."³ This historical document is just one example of the fear and mayhem of the era. In The Battle of Adrianople, 40.000 Romans were killed together with the Emperor Valens. It was heavy, dark, without any just proportion. This pivotal and amazing

¹ Browne, Edith., *Great Buildings, and How To Enjoy Them*, Adam and Charles Black, London (1906)

² Bond, Francis., *Gothic Architecture in England*, High Holborn (1905)

³ Parker, John Henry., *An Introduction to the study of Gothic Architecture*, Oxford & London (1861)

piece of human history is immersed in every single detail of Gothic architecture, which was resurrected beautifully all over the churches of Medieval Europe, leaving everybody in awe. This Battle was the start of the Fall of Rome and it was the first great event that unleashed the fear, which is the main characteristic of Gothic. *Medieval experiences of the Gothic* view, which is the Modern view of Gothic architecture, interprets the feeling of the people, who walked in those buildings in 1400's. One can say this is the best way to understand how mighty and unearthly the Gothic was. Vasari describes this resurrection as follows "Then arose new architects who after the manner of their barbarous nations erected buildings in that style which we call Gothic"⁴

Second approach is that the term "Gothic" is totally ideological and has nothing to do with Goths. "It was a pejorative term that came to be used as early as the 1530s to describe culture that was considered rude and barbaric. Francois Rabelais imagines an inscription over the door of his Utopian Abbey of Theleme, "Here enter no hypocrites, bigots..." slipping in a slighting reference to 'Gotz' (rendered as 'Huns' in Thomas Urquhart's English translation) and 'Ostrogotz.' In English 17th century usage, 'Goth' was an equivalent of 'vandal,' a savage despoiler, with a sense of 'Germanic' and so came to be applied to the architectural styles of northern Europe before the revival of antiquity, thus 'Gothic' architecture."⁵ This approach is directly focused on the vandal and barbarious characteristic of the medieval ages. The term Goth was already used to describe vandal and savage. So, Gothic was used to describe this new form of architecture which emerged after the vandals and savages. In either case the ideology is strongly stressed and both approaches refer to the social state of the nations and the people in medieval ages.

The evolution of Gothic architecture was at a time of profound social and economic change in Western Europe. In the late eleventh and twelfth centuries trade and industry were revived. "Merchants from the north and south met in central Champagne, for instance, at international fairs that were held at regular intervals throughout the year. Politically, the twelfth century was also the time of the expansion and consolidation of the State. Louis VI of France (1108-37) forced his recalcitrant vassals to acknowledge the royal authority and thereby laid the foundations of the kingdom that was to flourish in the next century, and only a little later Henry II Plantagenet brought order and unity to England and to his recently acquired domains on the Continent. Concurrently with these political and economic developments, a powerful new intellectual movement arose that was stimulated by the translation of ancient authors from Greek and Arabic into Latin, and a new literature, both lyric and epic, came into being. As a result of all these developments, the isolationism of the earlier feudal era gave way to a new, cosmopolitan world."⁶ This new phase the world was going through was infact an essential step towards globalisation. Born from the ashes of a Europe in mischief, Gothic architecture was now exposed to the rise of cultural communication. Cultural communication enabled other nations' cultures to contribute to the evolution of Gothic. Due to the slow building process of the architecture, different interpretations of different cultures were even sometimes seen in the same structure.

The Canterbury Cathedral is a great example for the diversity in Gothic. The earliest parts of Canterbury Cathedral of the nave and the crypt have indeed Romanesque curves which are referred as perfect curves. Mainly the perpendicular

⁴ Bond, Francis., Gothic Architecture in England, High Holborn (1905)

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gothic_architecture

⁶ <http://www.columbia.edu/~eer1/branner.html>

style and the ribs of Gothic architecture are eminent in the nave and other parts of the cathedral. But in some parts you see both of them. In the south quire aisle arches for example, two of the three arches are round like Romanesque and one of them is pointy like Gothic. Canterbury Cathedral has even a more interesting story, which shows us the ideological effects and changes on Gothic structures. The French artist Williem Sens falls down while working with the ceiling ribs and can't recover from his injuries and passes away. From then on, a British Gothic artist continues (who is also called William) the work. Although it's all Gothic, British and French styles have differences. And in northeast transepts, some arches are curved, some are pointy, some are narrow and some are wide. This adds a sense of diversity and rawness to the style of Gothic (Just like the rawness and deliberate flaws of Rodin)

The birth and evolution of Gothic style is like a macro-example of the exploitation literature in the 70's USA. After the Vietnam War, Assassination of Kennedy, Manson Family Massacre, Ted Bundy and other events that signalled the end of 60's-Hippy-innocence, in the 70's, the rage of people against government policies and unnecessary wars was reflected in cinema and comics which were quite easy to exploit. It was the rise of Gore and porn. In 1970's southern drive-in cinemas in America were full of blood, beasts and breasts (Texas Chainsaw Massacre, Last House on the Left, Dawn of The Dead). If the same situation is applied to a different art and a different time, architecture and 11th century, it is the same ideological path the art follows (in a macro-scale).

Due to the nature of architecture and medieval times, Gothic style's power was beyond imagination. The reaction in the Gothic content was chaotic. It rose from the ashes of world of pure battles, pure human. Yet ironically, Gothic is always referred to as unlike any other human structure, unearthly. Through the sacred churches of people, Gothic culture was spread all over Europe and effected every kind of possible art until today (the Goth-Rock genre of Marilyn Manson and even the contemporary mainstream popcorn TV series like Buffy the Vampire Slayer can be small examples of it). That's why ideological currents hold a much more important place in the evolution of Gothic architecture rather than the technological innovations. It is a huge mosaic of ideological currents and reactions. Finally the paradoxical result of the argument is that Gothic style is the reflection of human nature's reaction to itself. It's a reaction to the destructiveness within its nature. The destructiveness is pure human, and unarguably it is one of the distinct and certain essences of humankind. It is our fate. Gothic is a reaction against the misery and malevolence of human nature. It is a reaction against the endless battles of the middle ages. It is a constructed work, paradoxically symbolizing the destructive end of human beings. Gothic architecture is the mankind's greatest artistic reaction to their fate.

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