



The Arch Never Sleeps

Introduction to Ely and Chartres Cathedral

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Cathedrals were the largest structures to be built in Europe until iron and steel became available. This is Chartres, a fine example of early French Gothic architecture. The towers at the west end of the building flank a long nave where the congregation sit. The shorter, rounded, east end is known as the Choir, where the monks and priests officiate. Impressive on the outside and magnificent within, yet this cathedral was constructed around 1200 AD, built predominantly of stone blocks and weak mortar. So how is it that a massive structure like this can remain standing for so long, and without the reinforcing techniques of today? It's a great balancing act, involving buttresses and pinnacles - the props and weights designed into a building like this. In England work on Ely Cathedral began before Chartres in 1150, although the building was finally completed long after its French cousin. So this cathedral is particularly interesting in the way it contains two main styles of architecture. The Great West Tower fronts a nave which was built in the Romanesque style of round-arched, heavy Norman churches. The Choir was built a century later in what's called the Gothic style. Looking closely at the two cathedrals shows up defects, for example, the weight of the Great West Tower at Ely has pushed the roofline down where it meets the tower, but this isn't a major worry as stone is very adaptable, despite being so solid.