

The Cathedral Builders

by Jean Gimpel

Translated by Teresa Waugh



God as the Architect of the Universe: miniature from an Old Testament, French mid-thirteenth century (Vienna).

Grove Press, Inc., New York

Working the Stone

In the hierarchy of cathedral builders the labourer is clearly at the bottom of the ladder, but, so long as the Middle Ages were in the ascendant, he had every opportunity to better himself. By his work and his intelligence he could become a specialized craftsman; he could save a little money and set himself up on his own as a contractor, or he could study to become an architect. Medieval society allowed the humblest of men to fill the highest offices. The future belonged to the ambitious. There is a certain analogy to be drawn between the evolution of the medieval worker's world and the evolution of the American worker's world. The medieval labourer could, so to speak, become a self-made man and acquire a respected position in the town.

Labourers were mainly recruited from among the rootless, often serfs fleeing from their feudal lords who came to find shelter in towns far away from their birthplaces. If they were not found by their masters before a year and a day were up, they became freemen and citizens of the town. Labourers also came from peasant families with large numbers of children, some of whom left home in search of freedom and adventure in the towns. They could find immediate employment in any of the numerous workshops in the town. Workers on the sites were free men.

The work given to the labourers varied. Records at Autun show they helped the carpenters to transport the oak wood, they dug to open up quarries and took flies to the roof of the church of Saint-Lazare. Accounts from the Augustinian convent in Paris show that, among other tasks, they dug the foundations. There are frequent entries like: 'For removal of earth in order to build foundations. To Gautier for removing earth for the foundations of the sacristy. To Gautier for clearing the foundations.'

On the sites they carried a variety of materials in baskets on their backs, as can be seen from the following extracts: 'To two pannier bearers, three days each, 3 sous, 6 deniers. To seven pannier bearers, five days each, 20 sous, 5 deniers.' The daily wage for these labourers was about 7 deniers; semi-skilled workers like plasterers earned 10 or 11 deniers and specialized workmen like masons and stonemasons were paid about 20 or 22 deniers. Living conditions for labourers must, therefore, have been quite hard, as the wages were not very high and, above all, work was intermittent.

It is hard to reconcile the presence of these labourers on the site with the legend of voluntary work. This can only have been episodic and can have accounted for only a tiny part of the construction force. The unpaid workman was in effect taking the bread from the mouths of men in search of work. The only jobs which could be done by an unskilled labourer were carrying and digging, and labourers must have looked askance at anyone who offered his services free of charge.

The *chanson de geste* about the four Aymon sons tells the story of a legendary nobleman, Renaud de Montauban, who, in expiation of his sins, went to work on a site. He accepted only the humblest wage. After a week the workmen began to worry and joined forces against this man who was ruining prices: they decided to kill him and hit him on the head from behind with a hammer and threw his body in the Rhine. The crime did not go unpunished as, luckily, the fish gathered themselves together and lifted up the body which travelled down the current lit by three candles. This story symbolizes the workers' hostility towards the unpaid labour of the zealously faithful.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)
[Stone Foundation Home Page](#)