

the primary source for ideas still came from illuminated manuscripts and their stylized symbols for nature's forms.

Duccio, working primarily from about 1275 until around 1320, was one of Siena's most prominent painters, and his most important single commission was a large altarpiece called the *Maesta* for the Cathedral of Siena. The altarpiece is about seven feet in height and is painted on both sides. The front depicts the Virgin as Queen of Heaven surrounded by hosts of angels and saints. The main panel is flanked by smaller panels showing various events in the life of Mary. On the reverse are small panels with scenes from the life of Jesus. The *Maesta* was painted between the years 1309 and 1311 by Duccio and his assistants.

Duccio, while continuing to ignore the more naturalistic perspective and scale which will be evident in the Renaissance, is successful in creating at least some quality of third dimension in the space his figures occupy, but the emphasis is still essentially on flattened stylized forms. His figures do show a significant break with the more static ones of the typical Byzantine approach. His handling of the drapery of the clothing does indicate some natural human form beneath, but the poses are some distance from fifteenth-century treatment--or even from those of Giotto, for that matter. However, his use of light as an element to create a more solid form suggests that his source for treatment of human figures is sculpture rather than icons.

Indicated by the size of the *Maesta* and one of Cimabue's major works, *Madonna Enthroned Among Angels and Prophets* (about 13 feet high and 7-1/2 feet wide) is an important trend towards large-scale painting. This is a significant break with the predominantly miniature painting of the medieval period. The aforementioned works are painted in tempera on wood panels. With Giotto and his contemporaries a generation or so later, and in the Renaissance, large wall murals in the medium of fresco (invented by the Minoans and used by the Greeks, Etruscans, and Romans in antiquity) became commonplace. Cimabue's works and the panels of Giotto's early period in Assisi, in spite of the presence of certain three-dimensional elements, still have the icon look.

Giotto (1266-1337) had been apprenticed to the workshop of Cimabue and continued to work in the style of the master until about 1290, when he became one of the early masters of the narrative style, a good example of which can be seen in the frescos of the *Life of St. Francis* in the Church of St. Francis of Assisi.<sup>2</sup> By then Giotto had developed a solid plastic treatment of forms with a feeling of weight in space that was to come to full fruition in the Arena Chapel in Padua and during the final years in Florence. There seems to be little doubt that, in addition to sculpture,

---

<sup>2</sup>There is some disagreement among scholars about the authenticity of these works. There is no written evidence about them, but it is possible that they were executed by Giotto-influenced painters and not the master.

the theater was also a source of inspiration for Giotto. He treats background elements like stage sets and breaks away from the Byzantine ornamental treatment to provide a stage with space for the movement of his figures as they act out the story--much more than either Duccio or Cimabue did. He also uses a consistent light source.

Giotto's major commission in Padua was the Arena Chapel (so called because it was built in the ruins of an old Roman arena). An architect as well as a painter, he was commissioned by Enrico Scrovegno to build the brick upper church, organize a workshop of painters, and decorate the walls with fresco. The subjects are stories of the earthly life of the Virgin and Christ, culminating in a large fresco of the *Last Judgment*. The commission was completed in 1313.

In these frescos Giotto took important steps toward establishing the path along which the progressive painting style in Florence would develop in the next century in the work of such painters as Masaccio. As a pivotal figure between the close of the Gothic style and the important new developments of the early Renaissance, Giotto is often called the father of modern painting. His reputation was considerable during his lifetime, and it has never diminished over the centuries. He took the initiative in developing the quality of "real" rather than "ornamental" space through which figures move with convincing action. More than that, Giotto began to endow his figures with a personality and awareness not only of one another but also of the action or situation being depicted. His color tends to be more descriptive than ornamental as he departs from the traditional Byzantine stereotype approach. In short, he establishes a feeling of the reality of the narrative. An example is the fresco *Pieta*. His placement of forms is excellent and contributes to the rhythmic qualities that lead the viewer through the picture and allow him to take in the action of the event--the deposition of Christ from the cross. The frescos of the Arena Chapel have a compelling and elementary power which few, if any, of his contemporaries matched.

When Giotto was enticed to Florence as chief architect and painter of the city, he was the most famous artist in central Italy. The great tower next to the cathedral (designed by Arnolfo di Cambio, with the dome added later by Brunelleschi) is Giotto's finest architectural effort. The major Giotto commissions in Florence, however, were executed at San Croce Church. Unfortunately, these are extensively restored, and not very expertly at that. Scarcely anything remaining can be safely ascribed to the hand of Giotto. For one thing, the paintings were considered old-fashioned at a later date and were covered over with plaster. Discovered during some restoration work in the building in 1841, they were seriously damaged. Only the compositions are Giotto's. In their original state, however, the San Croce frescos had survived at least long enough to dazzle young Michelangelo when he first came to Florence to join the Classical Academy at the Medici Palace. When Giotto died, he had no equal, and Italy produced no painter of first rank until the fifteenth century.

Lastly, the Late Italian Gothic sculptors played an important part in summing up some of the final Gothic ideas and in setting the stage for



the Renaissance painting of figures and forms with volume and weight in space. Nicola Pisano, his son Giovanni, and Lorenzo Ghiberti are three among many very good Italian sculptors of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries who established a tradition of marble carving (with different technical problems and different solutions made possible by using marble over the limestone used by the French).

Both of the Pisanos are famous for their elaborate marble pulpits. Giovanni's most beautiful is in the Cathedral of Pisa (1310). It was damaged in the sixteenth century and now exists in several pieces in different museums (Pisa and Berlin). The Pisa pulpit is highly emotional and more influenced by southern French Romanesque than by Gothic. The distortions and facial characteristics of its subjects at the Crucifixion are almost hysterical. It is really a masterpiece of expressionistic religious art and must have caused quite a stir in its time. Giovanni also worked with Giotto on the Arena Chapel commission in Padua (1305) and his standing madonna by the altar (one of the few free-standing sculptures of the time) complements Giotto's magnificent religious cycles of painting, probably the greatest up to that time. Nicola had begun a hesitating revival of classical forms in his work, but Giovanni radically changed the tradition his father had launched.

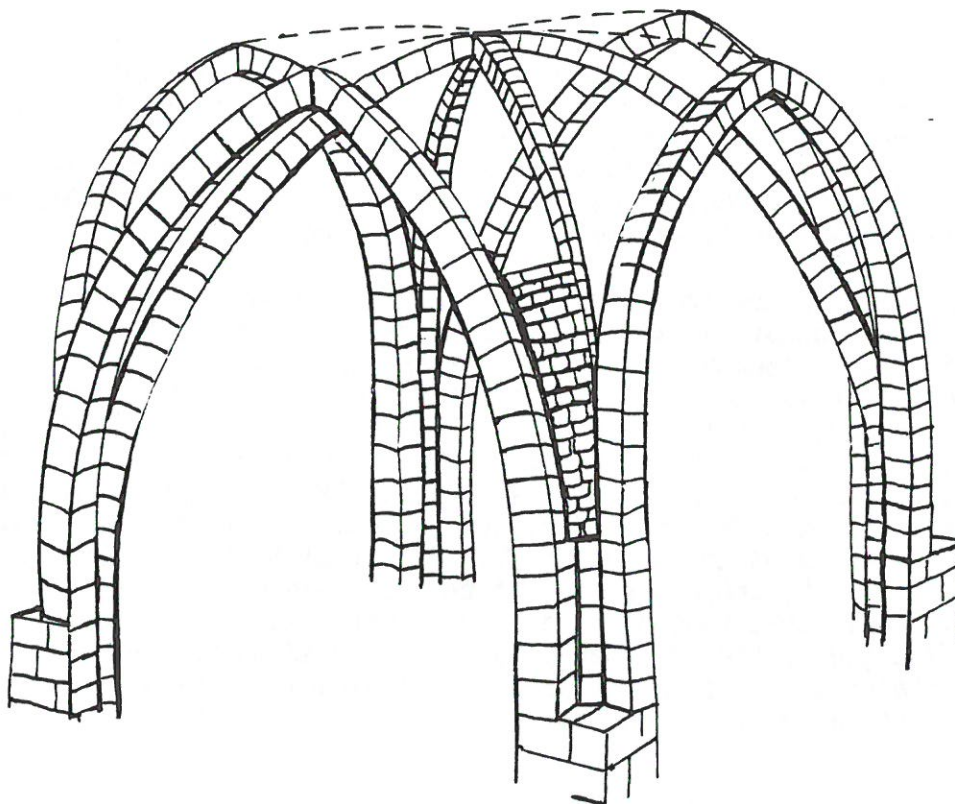
R.W.N.  
Rev. 1976

#### FOR FURTHER READING

Baumgart, Fritz. *A History of Architectural Styles*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970.

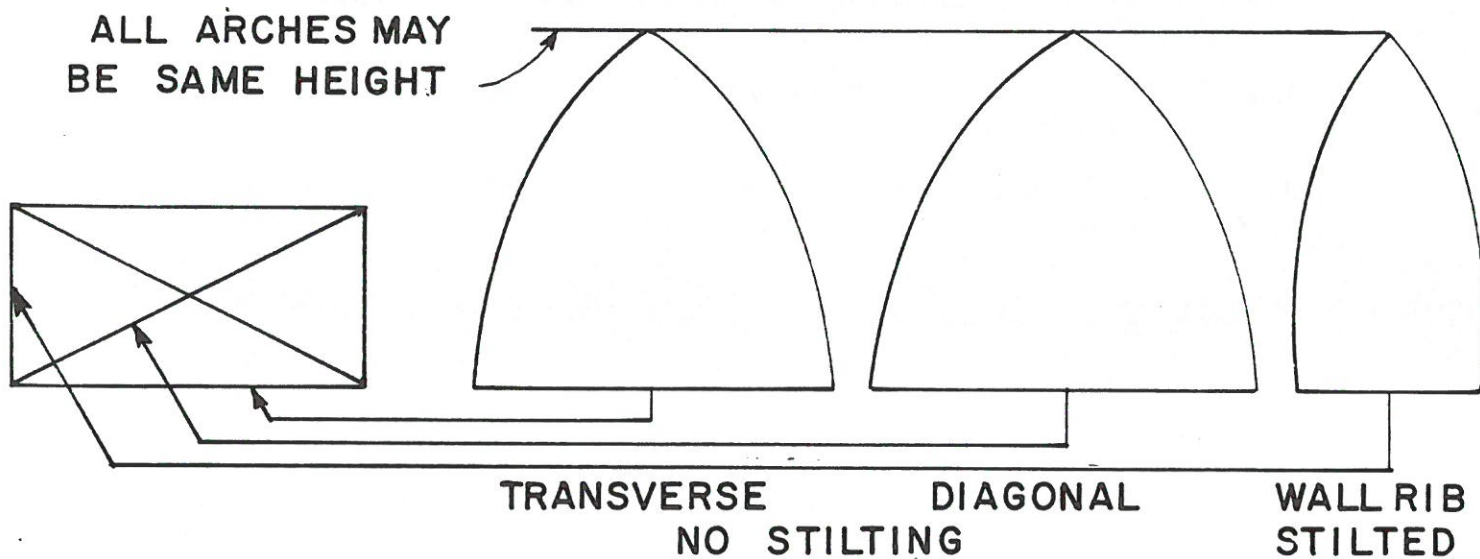
Branner, Robert. *Chartres Cathedral*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1969.

Janson, H. W. *History of Art*. Rev. ed. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., and New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1969.

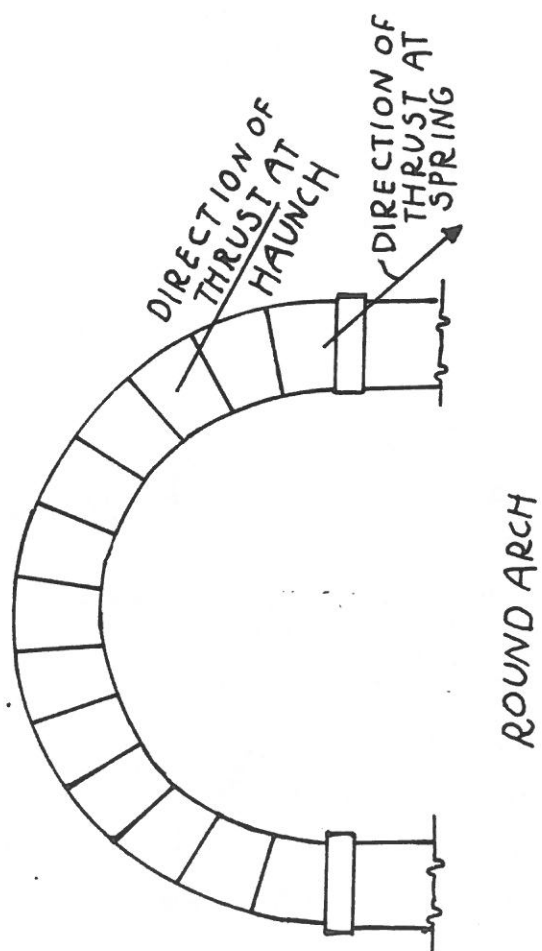
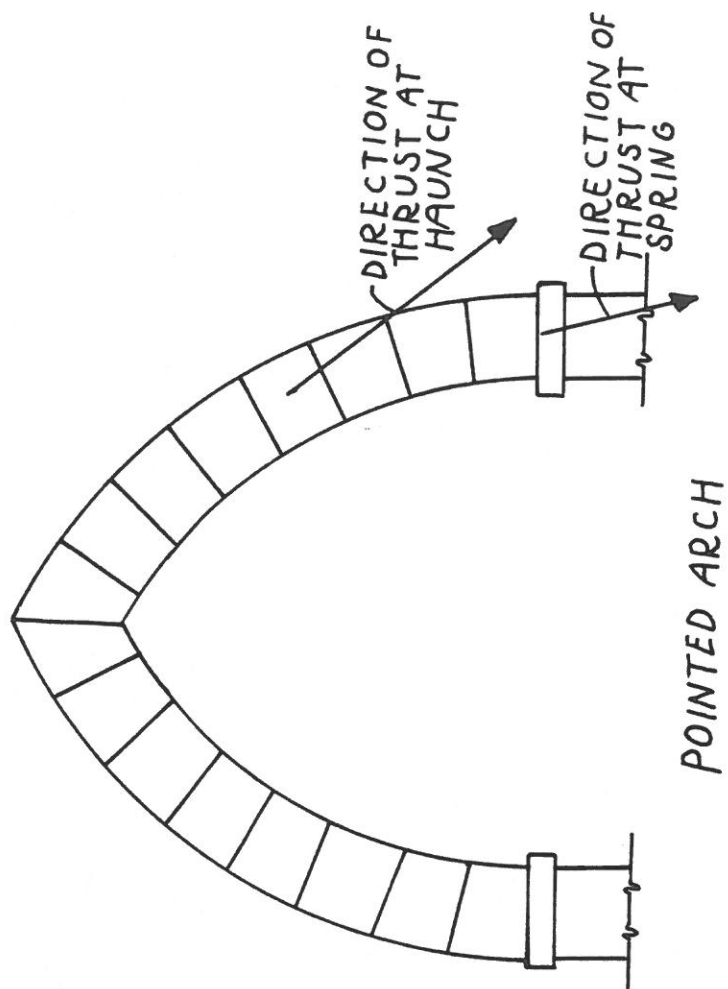


### DEVELOPED GOTHIC VAULT

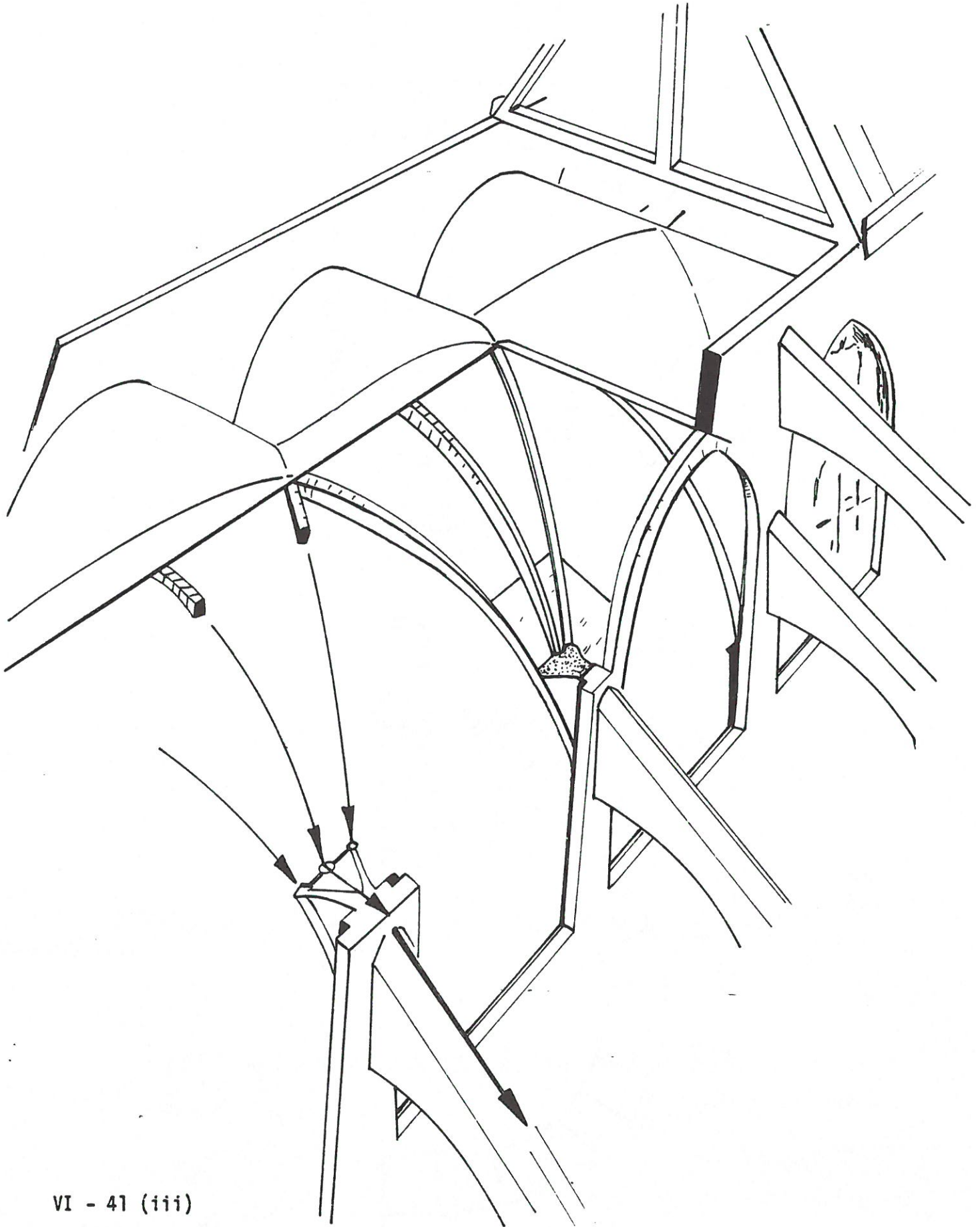
Pointed and stilted arches - almost level crowns.  
A section of the thin web shown in place.

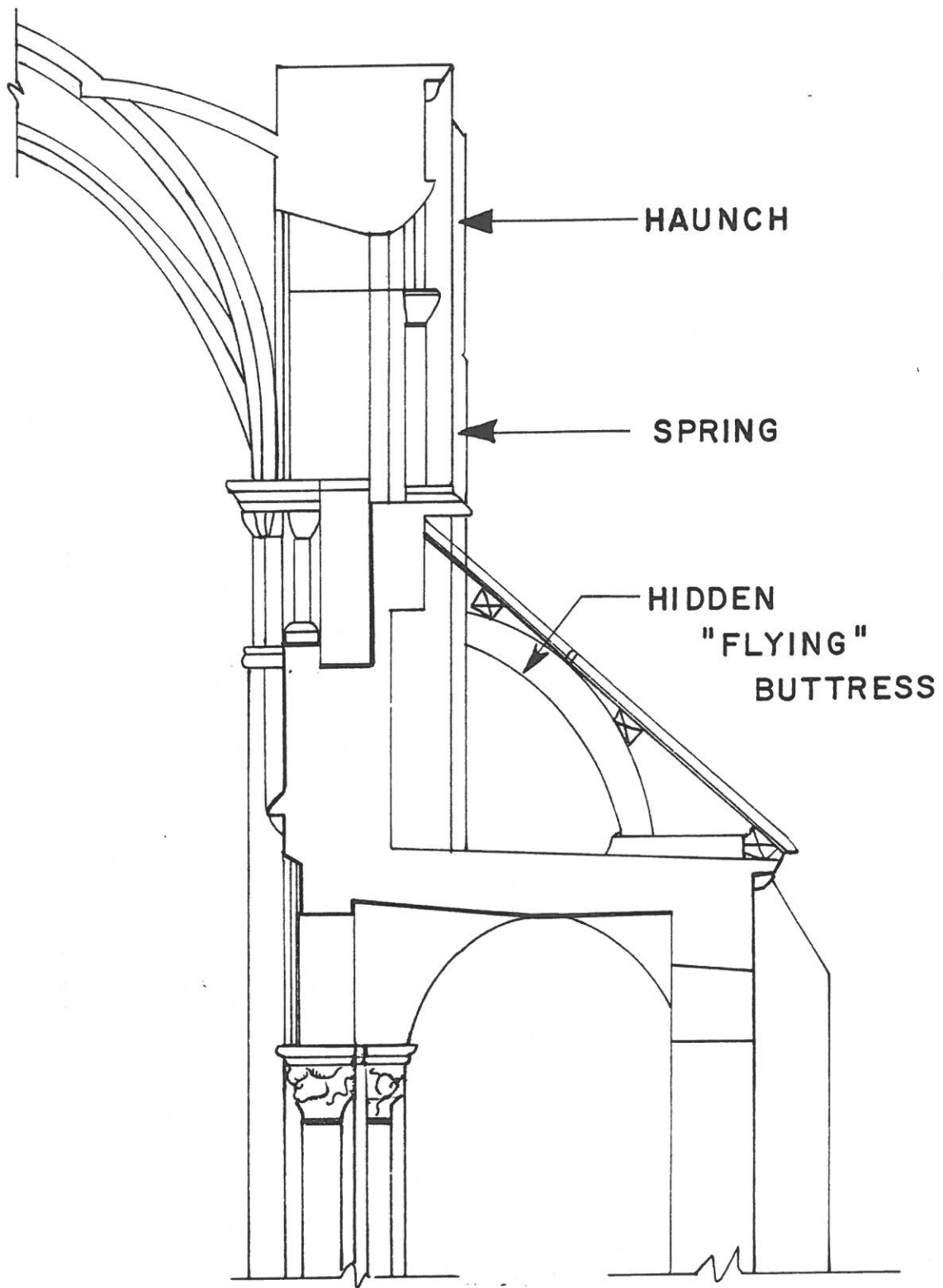


Gothic method for bringing all arches of the vault frame to the same height regardless of their great or short span.



Schematic drawing to illustrate the concentration of thrusts achieved by the system of cross vaulting developed in France during the High Gothic era.





CAEN. LA TRINITÉ.  
*(Placement of buttresses)*



LITERATURE

*"Scripta manent" ("What is written endures.")*

The organization of European society in a feudal relationship began early in the medieval age; by the twelfth century the idealism and social patterns were fixed and presumed immutable. By the thirteenth century feudalism was anachronistic, though most people still believed in its idealism and values.

The Crusades, beginning in 1095 and finally ending in the middle of the thirteenth century, occupied much of the time of the nobility and helped to sustain the feudal system long after it had lost its pragmatic purpose. Though these ventures were almost all rationalized as service to Christendom, the later Crusades were probably disguised piracy expeditions. The plunder of wealthy Byzantine lands found its way back to the cold stone castles of European nobles, creating a taste for luxury and opulence that would later serve as a stimulus for exploration and exploitation during the Renaissance.

Meanwhile, successive waves of growth and change, decadence and purification were occurring in the institutions of the Church. The greatest spiritual power in medieval Europe was also becoming the supreme temporal power. Younger sons of powerful nobles were entering the service of the Church, often as secular priests and frequently with education from the new universities. The orders of friars vied with the older monastic foundations for the privilege of educating and ministering to the humbler classes. At several critical points, the open rivalry for power between church and temporal rulers erupted in conflict, such as the famous quarrel between Henry II and his vassal, Thomas a Becket, murdered in his own cathedral in 1170 because he defied his sovereign. A growing questioning deepened into profound disillusionment with the Church when Pope Clement V moved the seat of the papacy to Avignon in 1305. Though later popes returned to Rome, the schism--with two and later three popes claiming the supreme power--did not finally end until 1418. By that time, a century of squabbling among powerful churchmen, aided by corrupt nobles, had thoroughly discredited the papacy.

One other major event marks the social change during this period: the plague years, 1348-49, decimated the population in parts of Europe, leaving the old feudal order permanently ruined. The serfs who survived were no longer tied to the land; they could go anywhere in a labor-starved, increasingly urbanized country. The plague years also engendered a loss of



faith in the essential humanity of the Christian ideology itself. Death was no respecter of persons. High and low, wicked or pure, all perished; the survivors became more and more pessimistic about the power of the Church to minister to them spiritually.

The literature of this period reflects these changes in the social pattern: dying feudalism; growing power of the Church in the secular realm; increasing concern for saving souls and educating the baser born, which in turn enhanced the power of the Church in spiritual matters. These themes are countered by disillusionment with the military ethics of knights and rapacious kings, and a growing resentment of charlatanism among powerful churchmen. Satire is implicit in many of the major works, especially in the fourteenth century, revealing the critical attitude of concerned writers.

In discussing the audience for this literature, one must ignore the great illiterate mass of people: the serfs. Only a small percentage of landed nobles and their clerks had the leisure to write and read, to entertain others, or to teach. The intermingling of secular nobles with the clergy gradually brought about a larger educated class. By the fourteenth century, the audience for literature in all European languages had grown enormously. Though many writers, especially of imaginative literature, still had to read aloud, the audience understood the tales and, in a sense, were participants in a sophisticated literary world.

#### LITERATURE IN NORTHERN EUROPE

After the Viking period of the ninth and tenth centuries, the expansion of civilized settlements from the Scandinavian homeland into the coastal areas on the periphery of Europe brought new varieties of folktale and saga (ancient legend, myth or history, or a mixture) to lands whose literary tradition had been derived mainly from the Greco-Roman world. As we have seen, in the Old English period the barbarian world made a meager contribution of literature based on their own social and ideological patterns. Now the old mythology of the Norse, or Northmen, became the subject matter of a rather substantial body of verse and prose. The whole Norwegian world was Christianized early in the eleventh century, permitting a body of oral literature to be written down at last.

It was in Iceland, where the Norsemen of the Viking era had made a permanent settlement, that most of the early Norse literature emerged. The wonder of literary creation in such a wild and forbidding place is evoked by the nineteenth-century English author Thomas Carlyle in a lecture on "Heroes and Hero Worship":

*In that strange island, Iceland,--burst up, the geologists say, by fire from the bottom of the sea, a wild land of barrenness and lava, swallowed many months of every year in black tempests, yet with a wild, gleaming beauty in summer*

time, towering there stern and grim in the North Ocean, with its snow yokuls (mountains), roaring geysers (boiling springs), sulphur pools, and horrid volcanic chasms, like the waste, chaotic battlefield of Frost and Fire,--where of all places, we least looked for literature or written memorials,--the record of these things was written down. On the seaboard of this wild land is a rim of grassy country, where cattle can subsist, and men by means of them and of what the sea yields; and it seems they were poetic men these, men who had deep thoughts in them and uttered musically their thoughts. Much would be lost had Iceland not been burst up from the sea, not been discovered by the Northmen!

The principal sources of our knowledge about Scandanavian mythology are the two Eddas--the *Elder*, or *Poetic*, *Edda* and the *Younger*, or *Prose*, *Edda*. The precise meaning of the word *edda* is uncertain. The term first appears in the Icelandic poem "Rigspula," where it refers to a great-grandmother (Scandinavian myths and legends are often called tales of a grandmother). However, it is also said to derive from Oddi, the name of the farm where the author of the *Prose Edda* was brought up and educated, or to derive from the word *oor* ("poetry") and to mean "poetics."

The *Elder*, or *Poetic*, *Edda* is a collection of thirty-two poems (of unknown authorship) originally composed from the ninth century onward. Compiled somewhere around the middle of the thirteenth century, they were discovered in 1643 by the Icelandic bishop Brynjolfr Sveinsson, who entitled them the *Edda of Saemundar*, erroneously believing them to be the work of the Icelandic historian Saemund Sigfusson. The poetry of this *Edda* is divided into two groups, the first celebrating the deeds of gods and the second recounting the exploits of heroes, primarily the people and events connected with the story of Sigurd (the German Siegfried).

The *Younger*, or *Prose*, *Edda* was composed by Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241) in the early part of the thirteenth century. Designed as a handbook of poetics, it includes a complete Norse cosmology as well as a history of Norwegian and Icelandic poetry and explanations and examples of poetic diction and forms of verse.

In the Eddas we meet the world of Norse myth which, while not completely original (one recognizes Near Eastern, Greco-Roman, and Biblical elements) is also never completely borrowed. In Norse mythology creation begins in the Ginnunga Gap, the chasm between the region of mist and cold and the region of glowing heat. Here is generated by the effluences of the opposing regions the primal giant Ymir and his cow, Audhumbla. Audhumbla is eventually responsible for the creation of the god Odin and his brothers, who slay Ymir and from his body fashion the visible universe and from two trees the first man and woman. Midgard (mid-earth) is created as the abode of humankind while Asgard, the region above the earth (and joined to it by the rainbow bridge Bifrost), becomes the dwelling place of the gods. Touching all regions of the world, and supporting them, is the ash tree Yggdrasil, under whose roots dwell the three Norns, or Fates (the past, present, and future), who fix the destiny of each



person at birth.

The king of the gods and ruler of the world is Odin. He is also the particular protector of warriors, whose handmaidens, the Valkyries, bring heroes killed in battle to Valhalla ("the hall of the slain"). Here they are to feast and fight until the day of the final world conflict, the Ragnarok ("the doom of the gods") when they will do battle for the gods against the giants until all is destroyed by fire. After this will come a new world and a new race of men, led by Balder the Good, the god of innocence.

Among the other gods are Thor, Odin's son and god of thunder, who with his magic hammer manages to keep the giants and trolls under control (he became the most popular god among the common people while Odin remained the favored deity of the princes and war chiefs); Frigga, Odin's wife and goddess of the clouds, representing motherly love; Frey, the god of fertility; and Freya, the goddess of love.

Although the Norse gods are much like the Greek gods in their human characteristics (Frigga even carries the keys to the cupboards of the palace in the same way the Norse housewives do, hanging from her belt), they are less involved in the everyday disputes and trivialities of human life. When they are not storming around their world, fighting to eliminate the raging giants and terrible monsters that threaten the peace of earth, they spend their time in the elegant palaces of Asgard land. Odin relies upon the reports of the ravens Hugin and Munin, who daily fly over the whole world.

While the Norse stories are not so well known as the Greek myths, they are an important part of our Western heritage, for the conflicts between gods and giants, goddesses and monsters, reflect the unending struggles of the Northland people against the forces of rugged nature, the craggy mountains and the jutting icebergs, the bitter cold and the stormy seas.

Related to the Eddaic poems, but much more ornate and often metaphorically obscure, are the poems of the scalds (poets), which praised kings and princes, in whose presence, and for whose favor, they were recited. In prose, both history and fiction became the subjects of the sagas that flowered in the thirteenth century. Among the family sagas (also known as the sagas of the Icelanders) are *Njal's Saga* (Njal Thorgeirsson of Bergthorsknoll, whose enemies destroy him and his family by burning his home), *Egil's Saga*, *Laxdoela Saga*, and *Gisli's Saga*. The greatest and most celebrated of the historical sagas is Snorri's *Heimskringla*, which provides a fanciful chronicle of the Norwegian kings down to the year 1184. In the mythic-heroic realm, the saga of Sigurd, the *Volsunga Saga*, is based on the heroic poems in the *Poetic Edda* and others since lost. (This saga, according to most scholars, is the basis for Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelungs*--a much distorted retelling of the basic mythological material.)

Another version of the events of Sigurd/Siegfried and the Nibelungs was composed around 1200 (or somewhat later) by an unknown poet writing



in an Austrian dialect of High German. It is called the *Nibelungenlied* (*Song of the Nibelungs*), and its plot, according to a modern translator, can be reduced to a few words:

*The story . . . is one of murder and of revenge long-nourished, and it ends in the destruction of two armies. The avenger is a woman; she avenged her beloved husband; her victims are her brothers and kinsmen. This, in its crudest terms, is the plot: having won the amazonian Queen Brunhild for King Gunther in exchange for Gunther's sister Kriemhild, the mighty King Siegfried is murdered by Gunther's vassal Hagen after a quarrel between the queens; for which Kriemhild, at long last, avenges him.*<sup>1</sup>

The *Nibelungenlied* is probably the most polished work of its kind in this period and an excellent example of Teutonic epic. The other poems dealing with the same subject matter are useful to the antiquarian, but a clear view of the mythology and values of the northern writers is best seen in the *Nibelungenlied*.

A major Germanic epic of another kind is Gottfried Von Strassburg's *Tristan* (c. 1210), which properly belongs to the Arthurian cycle tradition and other romance literature composed at about the same time in France. Gottfried borrowed the story from an earlier (c. 1160) manuscript by a poet named "Thomas," conjecturally from the Anglo-Norman court of Henry II and Eleanor. "Thomas" was not the only one to retell the tragedy of Tristan and Isolde, the Celtic lovers unwittingly betrayed by a love potion. Gottfried's version, though incomplete, reflects the extraordinary popularity of romance literature far from its home.

#### CHRONICLE AND ROMANCE IN WESTERN EUROPE

Although Charlemagne died in 814, the tales of his age were not forgotten, particularly in French-speaking lands; the *chansons de geste* ("songs of deeds") that were told by *jongleurs* for centuries after Charlemagne's time were finally written down in the twelfth century. *The Song of Roland*, dealt with in the preceding unit, cannot be certainly dated much before the twelfth century. More than a hundred *chansons de geste* survive in French. As a group, these tales are marked by the absence of "courtly love" elements; women are almost non-existent in a man's world devoted to warlike exploits. They betray their *jongleur* origin in the verse pattern: they are usually written in ten-syllable lines, rhyming by assonance, and intended to be sung with a musical accompaniment.

---

<sup>1</sup>*The Nibelungenlied*, trans. A. T. Hatto (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 7.