

# The symbolism of figures in Picardy cathedrals



*“A cathedral represents a view of paradise. Paradise is seen as a garden, and a cathedral is also seen as a garden. In Laon Cathedral, the columns inside are all topped with a basket of flowers and leaves, bringing to mind elements in such a garden.*

*The abacuses just above the columns are either square or octagonal. The square, with its four sides, symbolises the four cardinal points and the four elements.*

*With a square abacus, there are five small columns dropping down: The figure 5 represents man, as man has five humours and five senses. Like Man, these five columns are supported by the Earth.*

*The octagonal abacus is decorated by three columns dropping down. This represents those living in heaven. The Trinity – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost – the figure 3...”*

**Gaby MARTINET**, Guide-Lecturer at Laon Cathedral

Did you know that cathedral builders placed real mystical symbolism of direct links between God and Man in the decoration of their buildings? Behind the ancient silence of the old stone, remarkable mysteries are hidden, astonishing coincidences between architecture and the symbolism carried by certain figures. Every rose window, every column reveals a set of unsettling symbols, which it is possible to decode by means of the history of figures and the meanings associated with them.

Here are some explanations showing cathedrals and architecture in a different light. You will then understand the secrets that each cathedral holds and which make each of them a unique monument, bearing witness to the history of an entire people and an entire region. The Gothic and its birthplace are revealed to you... Here are a few keys by way of introduction.

Figures have a symbolic aspect which is found in all Picardy cathedrals: the three entrances represent the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Ghost), the figure 4 means the four elements (Earth, air, water and fire), figure 7 corresponds to the seven days of the week, etc.

Gothic symbols are primarily expressed in figures and images of nature. Some of the figures have a symbolic meaning, as follows:

**The figure 1** symbolises the circle – God, Heaven, Eternity, the spiritual world. The figure 1 is God from the Gods, the 1 from 0, the being born from primordial matter, the one God who created all things. He is the offspring of 0. He is the Son.

**The figure 2** symbolises the duality between good and evil, between day and night, between the sun and the moon, between light and dark, between man and woman. The figure 2 represents duality but also all complementarities. We had to understand that personal enrichment cannot be selfish and fragmented – we have 2 ears, 2 hands, 2 feet, 2 legs and so on. Pairs are needed for stability.

**The figure 3** symbolises the Trinity. It is the symbol for the sacred, for eternity. It is the perfect triangle between the Spirit, Heaven and the Soul. The triangle, a shape that never changes and can only be divided into a triangle. When equilateral, it is a direct symbol for God.



**The figure 4** symbolises the elements of nature, of which there are four - earth, air, fire and water. Four is also the number of seasons, rivers in Paradise, Evangelists, and cardinal points. Ultimately, 4 symbolises Earth, a material symbol.

*The figures 3 and 4 are often combined – associating the Spiritual and the Material, Heaven and Earth, the soul and the body. Consequently, one may see three openings (symbolising heaven) on a cathedral's walls, made above four others (symbolising the Earth).*



**The figure 5** symbolises the pentagon. It represents Humanity. It is the figure of creation plus the divine digit (4 +1), and also the figure for Man (the five fingers and five senses). The figure 5 also corresponds to the five wounds of Christ, represented by the five crosses engraved on the altar. Mankind is also the famous fifth element, love, which gives it its unique meaning. Mankind seeks direction amongst the 4 cardinal points (see the symbol 4) but he forgets to look towards the 5<sup>th</sup> "cardinal" point which is above his head – heaven!

**The figure 6** – the hexagon – symbolises power and the superhuman. This idea of power is obvious in the 6 days of the creation (the hexameron). A relationship exists between 6 and Christma. The first two letters of the word Kristos (Christ in Greek) form a six-armed star, the universal symbol of salvation.

**The figure 7** – the heptagon – represents the components of the body and the soul. It is the sacred number for the New Alliance.  $7 = 3 + 4$  : the perfect union of God and Man. The figure 7 also indicates the fullness of time and the completion of the world (*"And on the seventh day, God finished his work which he had done, and he rested," Genesis 2, 3*).

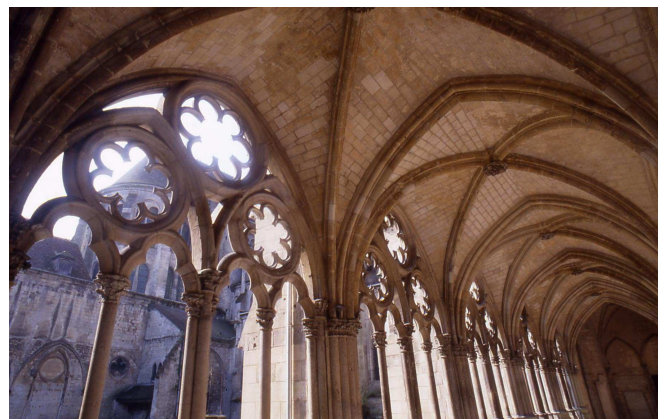
**The figure 8** – the octagon – is a symbol of resurrection, of rebirth through baptism. That is why many baptisteries are octagonal in shape. Octagonal baptisteries are found as 8 is the symbol of new life (on the eighth note, a new octave starts).

**The figure 9** – the nonagon – is a number based on 3 ( $3 \times 3 = 9$ ). The plan of Celestial Jerusalem is based on the number 9 (a square made up of nine squares), and there are nine choirs of Angels (Angels, Archangels, Virtues, Powers, Principalities, Dominions, Thrones, Seraphim and Cherubim).

**The figure 10** – the decagon – symbolises unity, Divinity. It is the sacred number of the Old Testament (the Ten Commandments). According to Pythagorean doctrine, it is the perfect number.

**The figure 11** – the hendecagon – is the symbol of sin. After Judas' betrayal, the apostles numbered 11.

**The figure 12** – the dodecagon – symbolises the Universal Church, the 12 months, 12 hours, 12 signs of the Zodiac, and the 12 apostles and the 12 tribes of Israel. One way to reach the number 12 is to multiply the Trinity by the four cardinal virtues.



**The figure 13** symbolises Misfortune.