

Historical Background

The beginnings of the Cologne Bishopric reach well back into the fourth century. The first known bishop, Maternus, was already mentioned in the earliest documents of 313/314. Excavations in the area of the cathedral carried out since the Second World War also reveal a series of additions and changes to the previous buildings as well as the building activity of the current structure. For example, on the current site of the Gothic cathedral there was once a structure with a double-choir, circa 95 meters/1312 feet long, which was consecrated in 870. This "older" structure's external appearance can be surmised based on an illustration in a medieval manuscript dated to 1020, namely the Hillinus Codex in the Cathedral Library (compare to the mosaic depiction described in entry No. 5).

In 1164 Archbishop Rainald von Dassel († 1167) transferred from Milan the bones of the Three Magi into this "older" cathedral. A precious reliquary shrine was ordered to house these relics and the work on it probably began during the tenure of Rainald's successor, Archbishop Phillip von Heinsberg († 1191). The goldsmith Nicolas from Verdun was presumably quite involved in making this exemplary work, which was only finished in 1225 (see No. 19).

The famous relics drew the faithful from all of Europe and the Cologne Pilgrimage became one of the largest of the Middle Ages. For this reason the Cathedral Chapter decided in 1248, under the direction of Archbishop Konrad von Hochstaden († 1261), to build a new structure suitable for such an important cathedral and pilgrimage church. To accomplish this the chief architect did not turn to the Romanesque architecture of Germany, rather he sought the "modern" Gothic architecture of the French cathedrals. Moreover, the measurements of the Cologne plan surpassed all other churches of its time.

Around 1265 the radiating chapels and the ambulatory of this new structure were completed. The first art objects of the east end also originate from this time. By 1300 the entire east end was finished, even though the consecration took place in 1322. After 1322 the speed of the remaining construction slowed down: the construction of the south tower was begun around 1360 and was only completed to the height of the second story. In 1388, the founding year of the University of Cologne, the two south side-aisles of the nave were in use. By the end of the fifteenth century, seven bays of the northern side-aisles were vaulted (covered with their stone ceiling). When construction was finally discontinued in 1560, the first floor of the nave and transept were for the most part useable, in addition to the already finished choir from the year 1300. According to a fifteenth-century document, the Shrine of the Three Magi was to be placed in the crossing of the completed cathedral. It has been located in its current position only since 1948.

The construction of the entire cathedral was completed during the nineteenth century. Friedrich Wilhelm IV from Prussia laid a ground stone in 1842 as construction first resumed again since 1560 and already by 1880, in the presence of Emperor Wilhelm I, the last stone of the finial was placed atop the south tower. Some of the most important Neo-Gothic works of art come from this period of the Cathedral's construction.