



Medieval Champagne

Architecture, sculpture and stained glass

16–23 September 2025 (ML 782)

8 days • £3,280

Lecturer: John McNeill

Outstanding Gothic architecture, with some of the finest collections of medieval sculpture and stained glass in France.

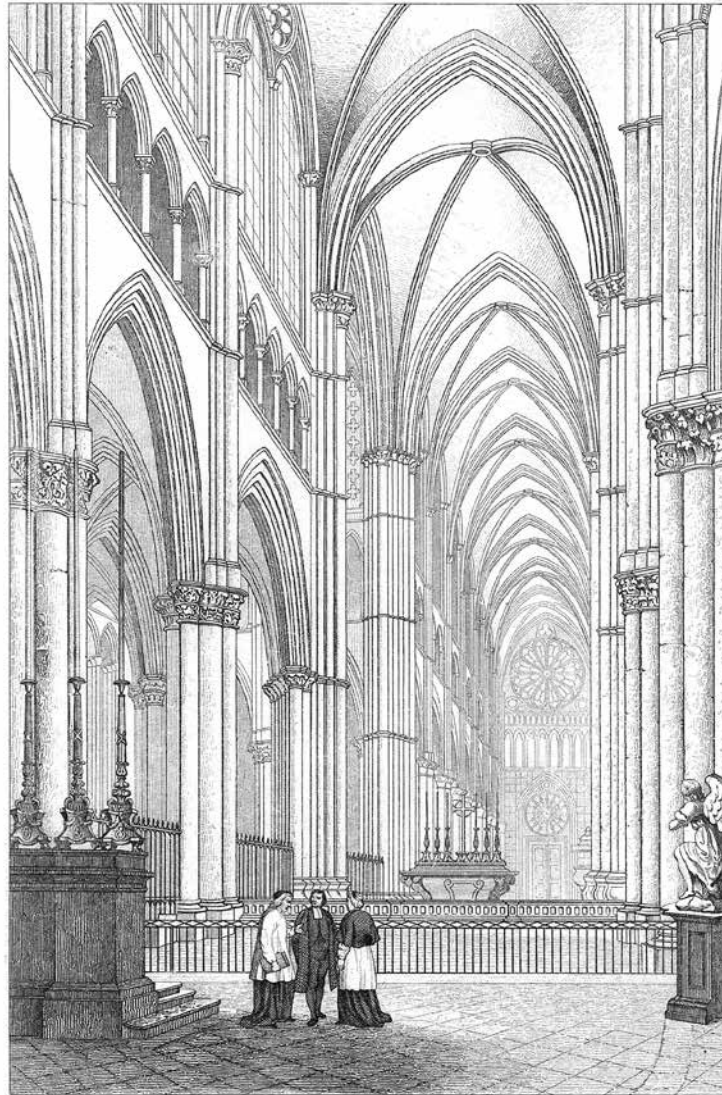
Based in Reims and Troyes, two of the three principal centres of medieval Champagne.

Led by John McNeill, renowned architectural historian.

Champagne is better known for its wine than its monumental culture, though along with neighbouring Burgundy it abounds in architecturally distinguished towns. The old county also played a major role in the development of Gothic architecture and retains more medieval statuary and stained glass than any other region in France. The Middle Ages made for Champagne.

The old county recognised three principal towns, Reims, Provins and Troyes – all of them sites of major European annual fairs (indeed the system of measurement used for weighing gold at the fairs in Troyes remains in use to this day). This lent a cosmopolitanism to medieval Champagne – an openness and suggestibility evident in its material culture, above all in the surviving later medieval sculpture and stained glass. It is in recognition of this that a major extension to the old stained-glass museum – the Cité du Vitrail – was recently inaugurated in Troyes. But Champagne should equally be celebrated for its earlier monuments – particularly the 11th and 12th-century buildings, and as the art and architecture of southern Champagne is inextricably entwined with that of Burgundy's far north, the tour will drift over the border to examine Châtillon-sur-Seine, Pontigny and Auxerre.

The greatest of the 11th-century buildings are the mighty abbey of St-Remi at Reims and the tiny hill-top church at Châtillon, while for the 12th century one is spoiled for choice – Notre-Dame-en-Vaux at Châlons-en-Champagne, Orbais, Pontigny. Gothic arrived early, and there began a second wave of experimentation – tentative at first, but the 13th century soon saw Champagne at the cutting edge of Europe. At Reims, the tracery window was invented, at Troyes the clerestory window was perhaps first glazed, and throughout Champagne elaborate sculptural ensembles clambered aboard the churches. Moreover,



Reims Cathedral, 19th-century engraving.

the patrons invested heavily in glass, blazing interiors with a heady combination of light, imagery and colour. The latest of the 13th-century churches marks something of a change of direction, however, and though it boasts the modest intimacy of a chapel, St-Urbain at Troyes is one of the keys to late medieval architecture in Europe.

In common with most of France, Champagne suffered grievously during the Hundred Years War, and recovery was protracted and uneven. That prodigious concentration of sculptural and glazing shops responsible for the glazing and jubé of La

Madeleine at Troyes only reached saturation in the first quarter of the 16th century, but there remains much to savour here as well, and in the neighbouring churches of Chaource and Villemaur-sur-Vanne.

Itinerary

Day 1. Take the Eurostar at c. 10.30am from London St Pancras to Paris, then continue by coach to Reims for the first of two nights.

Day 2: Reims. Day entirely devoted to Reims – beginning with a morning walk to the

Medieval Champagne
continued

cathedral, possessor of the greatest and most varied display of architectural sculpture in France. Afternoon at the abbey of St-Remi, and among the stunning Roman and medieval collections housed in the adjacent monastic precinct.

Day 3: Châlons-en-Champagne, Orbais, Troyes. In the course of the 1960s around two thirds of the sculpture from a late 12th-century cloister was discovered behind the church of Notre-Dame-en-Vaux in Châlons-en-Champagne. The result was that a museum was built behind the church to house what ranks as the finest early Gothic cloister sculpture in Europe. It is a revelation – the best early Gothic sculpture to survive anywhere. The abbey at Orbais is the perfect illustration of the transition from early to high Gothic architecture. First of five nights in Troyes.

Day 4: Troyes. Start with Troyes Cathedral, whose treasury, flamboyant west front and richly varied stained glass add to a splendid, if neglected, ensemble – thence to a great papal foundation, the collegiate church of St-Urbain – daring, fragile, luminous – a building of razor-sharp tracery, openwork gables and fastidiously coloured glass. Afternoon divided between the wonderful 16th-century sculpture at La Madeleine, and the newly extended museum of stained glass – the Cité du Vitrail.

Day 5: Pontigny, Auxerre. An excursion into the Auxerrois – stopping at Pontigny, whose Cistercian church contrasts a pale and light-filled nave with a strikingly beautiful early Gothic east end – then Auxerre. Visit St-Eusèbe, the Cathedral and the amazingly well-preserved Carolingian crypt at St-Germain.

Day 6: Villemaur-sur-Vanne, Villeneuve-l'Archevêque. Morning drive to the west of Troyes; see the Renaissance wooden choir screen at Villemaur and the important episcopal church at Villeneuve-l'Archevêque, the town where Louis IX of France received the crown of thorns. Free afternoon in Troyes.

Day 7: Châtillon-sur-Seine, Tonnerre, Chaource. A varied day in the hills of northern Burgundy. Châtillon boasts a wonderful early Romanesque church on a hill above the Seine, and a museum built to house the Vix vase, a stunning bronze-age krater decorated with volutes and a frieze of charioteers. Afternoon spent in Margaret of Burgundy's great hospital at Tonnerre and in the charmingly ramshackle late medieval church at Chaource.

Day 8: Provins. Morning in Provins, third city of medieval Champagne, to see the well-preserved walled upper town and collegiate church of St-Quiriace. Continue to Paris and take the Eurostar to London St Pancras, arriving at c. 6.30pm.

Lecturer

John McNeill. Specialist in the Middle Ages and Renaissance – John lectures for Oxford University's Department of Continuing Education. He is Honorary Secretary of the British Archaeological Association, for whom he has edited and contributed to collections of essays on medieval cloisters, chantries, Anjou, and King's Lynn and the Fens. In 2010 he established a biennial series of international conferences on Romanesque visual culture. His most recent effort in this field – *Romanesque Saints, Shrines, and Pilgrimage* – was published in 2020. He is also author of the *Blue Guides* to both *Normandy* and the *Loire Valley*.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £3,280 or £3,030 without the Eurostar. Single occupancy: £3,780 or £3,530 without the Eurostar.

Included: return train travel by Eurostar (Eurostar Plus); travel by private coach; accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 5 dinners and 1 lunch with wine or beer, soft drinks, water and coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. Best Western Premier Hôtel de la Paix, Reims (bestwestern-lapaix-reims.com): a comfortable, modern and central 4-star hotel, originally three separate buildings. Rooms are bright and well-equipped. **Best Western Premier Hôtel de la Poste, Troyes** (hotel-de-la-poste.com): central 4-star hotel in a former coaching inn. Rooms are small but comfortable. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

How strenuous? There is a fair amount of walking and standing around within the towns. Many town centres are only accessible on foot, and paving may be cobbled or uneven. You need to be able to lift your luggage on and off the train and wheel it within stations.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.