

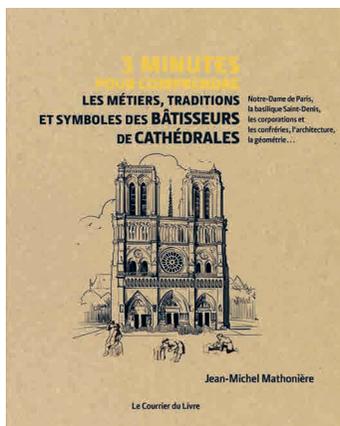


Interview

# Medieval craftsman builders – a fragmented history

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What do we know about the employment conditions of construction workers in the Middle Ages? What were their rights and their duties? What form of collective organisation did they have? Jean-Michel Mathonière, an expert on *compagnonnages* (journeymen societies) and a member of the French Construction History Society (Association Francophone d'Histoire de la Construction), shares the research findings of his book *3 minutes pour comprendre les métiers, traditions et symboles des bâtisseurs de cathédrales* (Understanding the trades, traditions and symbols of the cathedral builders in 3 minutes), published by *Courrier du Livre* in 2020.



➔ **What are your sources when researching how work on medieval construction sites was organised?**

A carpenter works with wood, a stonemason with stone and a historian with historical records. It is especially necessary to stick to the records because, when it comes to builders in the Middle Ages, a great deal of imagination is involved. We have written sources like town and abbey chronicles, where the abbot or a patron gives a detailed description of this or that worksite, including, for example, the dimensions of the building, and even the number of stonemasons working on it. Records of the building costs, if preserved, are very helpful too, particularly where the building still stands, because they indicate its size and scale. Accounts by bishops and local political dignitaries are also informative, even if they are always inflated by a desire to show moral grandeur. Take for example the story of one bishop who describes the fervour of devout local residents who voluntarily transported

stones to build a cathedral. How much credence can we attach to this? I prefer to rely on stained-glass windows, miniatures and sculptures which show real-life work situations and trades. Some parts of them may not be to scale or are allegorical, but the depiction of tools and postures is generally realistic.

➔ **How long did it take to build a cathedral in the Middle Ages?**

It varied a lot and depended above all on money. They built fast when they had to. For example, the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, which was a royal palace chapel, was built in five years. The ramparts of Aigues-Mortes in the Gard department of France, built for defence, were completed in less than 30 years. But building work could stop and start again years later when more money became available, as was the case with the cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris. That might mean that a first team left and a new one came in. Because usually,



↖ A worker carefully mixes lime, sand and water. Detail of a medieval miniature (British Library).  
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*"Craftsmen took a 30-minute mid-morning break, and the master was well advised to provide a jug of wine!"*

➔ **What hours did they work?**

Working hours were the same everywhere: in almost every case, the hours of daylight, so from sunrise to sunset. This could be quite long, depending on the season, so there were rest breaks. At about 9 or 10 a.m., craftsmen took a 30-minute mid-morning break, and the master was well advised to provide a jug of wine! Then, from about 1-2 p.m., the workers stopped for a couple of hours for lunch and a nap. At the end of the afternoon, they downed tools again to drink a *canon* (a small glass of wine). There were a lot of religious holidays — no work, but no pay either.

➔ **What kind of accidents happened on these big construction sites?**

We know there were skin diseases, and burns from the lime the masons handled. The master provided craftsmen with gloves to protect their hands against such burns. On some stained-glass windows and miniatures, masons are shown working bare-handed. The heaviest loads were handled and moved using ox carts, teams of horses and lifting devices. But the rest were carried by people. So there were crippled backs and squashed toes. The Abbey of Saint-Gilles du Gard has a sculpture, on the base of a column, showing a craftsman with his foot trapped under the base. There is also an accident report dated 1476, from the building site of the cathedral in Langres. The writer says that large loads were brought down from height using lowering devices, but that small ones were thrown down, clear of the foot of the building. One day, a mason tossed down a stone that was

for large-scale projects in Europe from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards — cathedrals, abbeys, castles, fortifications, etc. — the workforce was recruited not from trade associations in the town concerned but from travelling teams of craftsmen, companies of individuals working with a master architect and contractor. These itinerant workers practised crafts requiring sophisticated technical skills that were not always available, or not sufficiently available, in the local workforce. These teams were paid by the piece, hence the masons' marks from which their work could be identified.

➔ **How many people were employed on a construction site?**

On average, the construction site of a large church would have between 50 and 100 skilled craftsmen working on it. For the most part, these were stonemasons and carpenters, but also blacksmiths whose job was to look after the tools and iron parts used to reinforce buildings. And then there were all the transportation trades: carters, farriers, wainwrights, etc. There were also unskilled labourers and volunteers, who were promised a share in paradise — remission of their sins.

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## "Falling from scaffolding was the number one cause of accidents in the absence of guard rails, lifelines or a safety harness."

perhaps heavier than the rest, and it landed close to the building, killing a woman passer-by. The mason was cleared of all blame.

Generally speaking, though, there are few reports of building site accidents prior to the appearance of ex-voto offerings in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many of these small tablets honouring a deceased person commemorate masons who had fallen from the scaffolding. This was the number one cause of accidents in the absence of guard rails, lifelines or a safety harness. One little movement, made too suddenly, was all it took... And, back then, it was better to be killed outright, because there wasn't much by way of hospital care and there was no social security. An accident at work left you crippled and poor. It was one reason for the emergence of the fraternities and, later on, the journeyman societies.

### → What were these fraternities exactly?

In all countries of medieval Christendom, exercise of a trade in the cities was very rarely free. It was circumscribed by a body of rigid administrative and fiscal rules, under statutes approved by the royal, municipal and ecclesiastical authorities. The organisations regulating a trade differed by region and period: community, corporation, fraternity, guild, art, trade, etc. But, in essence, their rules were similar: the association defined the conditions for apprenticeship to a trade, members' duties and obligations towards each other, good practice in relation to clients, work standards and the quality of raw materials. But also, and very importantly, the members' moral code and their relations with the Church — up to and including the conduct of the patronal feast day, the high point of which was the banquet after mass. These rules also governed funerals. The fraternity was responsible for paying for and organising the ceremonial rites. It was, in fact, the basic job of these groups to ensure that the craftsman had a "good death", by arranging a good

Christian burial for him, providing for his family and ensuring that the dead man's personal property was passed on to them once his debts had been settled. But these urban organisations were highly compartmentalised. Each trade tried to stop related occupations from working on this or that project. Some corporations even forbade their members to travel. It was this, among other factors, that encouraged the emergence of France's modern-day journeyman societies (the *compagnonnages*), as a rejection of this overly rigid system.

### → When did journeyman societies first appear?

As far as we know, they are first recorded in France early in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, an ordinance issued by Charles VI in 1420 against the shoemakers of Troyes says that "a number of journeymen and workers in this trade, speaking various languages and from various nations, are coming and going from town to town, working in order to meet up with, learn from, get to know and find out about each other". In 1539, in the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts, King Francis I repeats the prohibitions of several of his predecessors: "Similarly, no journeymen or workers may assemble as a so-called fraternity or other body, plot together to enter or leave employment with a master, neither may they in any manner whatsoever prevent such masters from choosing their own workers, whether French or foreign." This is sufficiently explicit to suggest that we are talking about journeyman societies here.

But again, it is an isolated reference. There are, however, indications that journeyman stonemasons existed as far back as the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, something made more likely and credible by a reference to journeyman societies in this trade in Germany that dates from roughly the same period.

### → What was the role of these journeyman societies?

It is apparent from an analysis of the records that the purpose of journeyman societies under the *Ancien Régime* was not to provide occupational training or even to improve existing skills. Their original purpose was worker solidarity, to provide workers with mutual assistance during their travels, whether these were freely undertaken to improve their skills or, for the sons of established contractors, as a youthful adventure or, in the case of men of modest means, driven by the need to find work wherever it

was to be had and to exert collective pressure on their bosses to make sure they were paid a decent wage.

Up to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, skilled craftsmen moved from one large construction site to another, taking their unique know-how with them. But, for them, this "tour de France" was not a "rite of passage" whereby they completed a number of stages and tests and were finally granted the title of *compagnon*. On the contrary, it was because they were capable of making a living from their trade that they were allowed to travel through France, honouring their society and not being a burden to it. This journey, which was not a systematic tour of the country, lasted for as long as the craftsman thought necessary or could afford to be away before returning home to marry and take over the family business. On average, this was four years, and it was a tour of the big regional economic centres where their journeyman society had branches. In other words, journeyman societies were primarily a network of fraternal solidarity, organised by trades, which you joined before you set out on your travels.

### → How, specifically, did journeymen help one another?

It is illuminating here to look at the oldest known rules of the "travelling journeyman stonemasons" from the 18<sup>th</sup> century: the first articles describe a journeyman's arrival in the town and how he had to behave in order to receive fraternal assistance from the "rouleur". For 24 hours, the new man had to be given food and drink; if possible, he had to be found a job, decent lodging, etc. If no work was available, the other journeyman in his *devoir* ("lodge") gave him money to get him to the next town. A departing craftsman was also given 24 hours' help before he left: he was well treated if he had been honest, was leaving with no debts and had abided by the rules of his journeyman society.

Journeymen also paid money into welfare funds for sick travellers. They were a kind of communal kitty, for all kinds of illness except venereal disease. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, these mutual funds expanded more widely, notably among journeymen stonemasons and carpenters. They had rules which required workers to visit their colleagues in hospital, for example. So whilst the most striking feature of the modern-day journeyman society is the passing on of know-how, its original purpose was not this, but fraternal solidarity. The birth of mutual assistance societies (the *mutuelles*

of the future), followed by pension funds and social security funds, gradually eroded this part of their *raison d'être*, shifting the emphasis towards greater transmission of occupational skills, a kind of "happy collateral damage".

→ **Is it fair to say that these journeyman societies laid the foundations of employment law?**

The earliest beginnings of employment law for stonecutters and masons under the Germanic Holy Roman Empire can be found in the 1459 Statutes of Ratisbon (present-day Regensburg). The lodge masters had met and drawn up a set of rules additional to existing local corporation rules and setting out the relations between masters and journeymen ("fellows"), along with good professional practice. Rules for apprentices and fellows on their "*Tour de Germany*" were set out in an annex.

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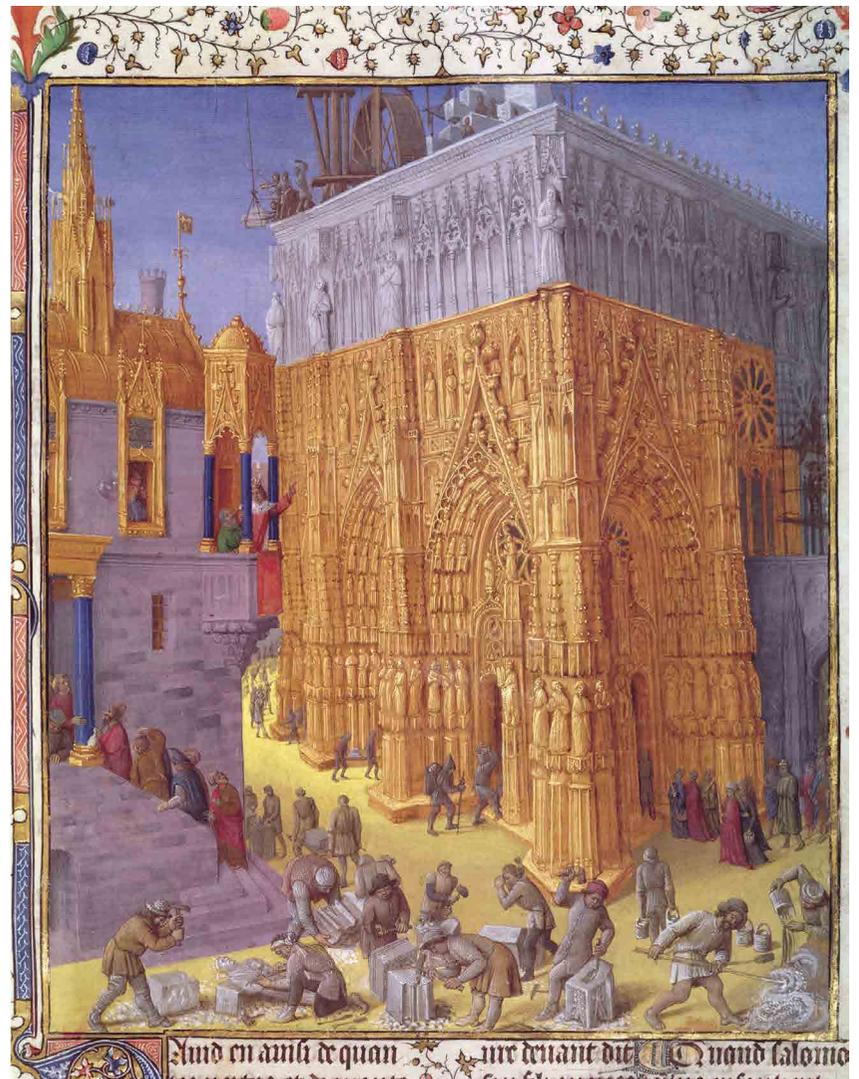
*"The original purpose of journeyman societies was not occupational training but fraternal solidarity."*

One article of the Statutes of Ratisbon says, for example, that the new master of a construction site had to pay fellows the same wage they had received previously. For his part, the newly arrived fellow had to promise to abide by all the corporation rules. Anyone who refused to do so or broke the rules would not thereafter be employed by any contractor who learned of the fact. If a qualified fellow, seeking advancement and having served for long enough in the trade in question, presented himself at a given construction site, he could be accepted. Or again, if a complaint was made to the master, he was required not to rule on it by himself but to consult two other nearby masters along with fellows working on the site. They examined the matter together and then referred it to the fraternity as a whole.

A number of articles deal with the death of the craftsman or master and the team's obligation to replace them and complete the work — paying the same wages as before. Masters and fellows also undertook not to

disclose the secrets of their trade — notably plans and designs — to persons not part of the fraternity.

In fact, over and above the customs, legends, rites and skills, and the differences in trades and historical or geographical origins, the element shared above all by journeymen is a mindset and values whereby the need to practise a trade — "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread", as the Bible decrees — becomes a route to personal and spiritual fulfilment. "Work and honour" was the motto of the travelling journeyman stonemasons of Avignon. And this quest by the individual to achieve perfection by transmuting the materials under his hand is probably the very essence of the journeyman tradition. ●



↑ The construction of the Temple of Jerusalem under the reign of King Solomon is depicted in the Middle Ages as if it were a contemporary gothic cathedral. Miniature by Jean Fouquet, third quarter of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Crédit Photo: © BnF