

Vaults at St.Etienne, Auxerre

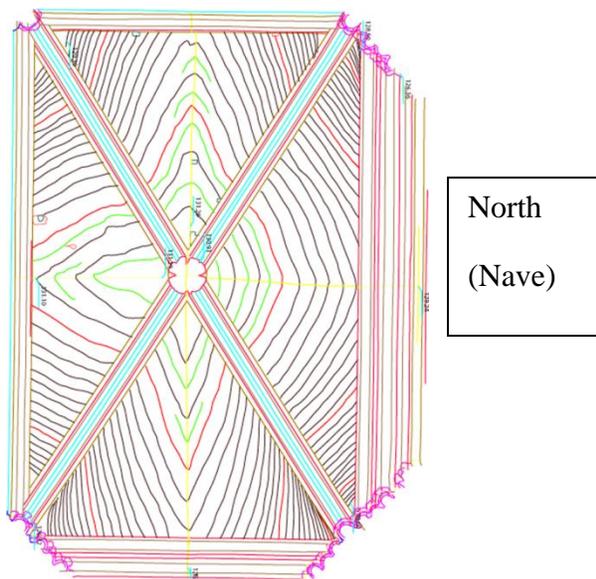
Phase 4: Second half 13<sup>th</sup> century

Bay 1S

Harry Titus, Wake Forest  
University

Around the time that the chevet program was completed, the attention of the cathedral patrons turned to the construction of a new west entrance considerably west of the Romanesque nave and its façade.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, the patrons adopted a building strategy similar to the one employed at St. Denis by Abbot Suger a hundred years earlier. The alignment of the west complex is closely related to the alignment of the chevet without being aligned exactly. Bear in mind that the Romanesque nave and facade were still extant between the two newer projects. The vault in the southwest aisle was probably the first to be completed, but since a single bay is at issue, caution about sequence is necessary. A single unit can be added at any point.

Vault 1S is a good example of the potential of the rib-vaulting system. The bay it covers is irregular in form and function. On its west is an entrance, on its south is a massively thick wall with a stairway entrance, it opens to the east between large, heavily molded piers designed to support a tower, and on its north a broad arch opens into the nave. Thus the vaulting compartment is irregularly rectangular along an east-west axis. The contours of the east and west vaultains are quite symmetrical. The south vaultain maintains a flat crown and meets the exterior wall surface 70 cm higher than the north vaultain meets the nave arcade arch; thus in the transverse sense the vault is steeper and flatter at the crown on its south and curves gently down to the arch at the north. The web construction is “normative” following the criteria established in the discussion of normative bay 6N. As a result, the vault gives an impression of regularity while in fact it covers rather disparate elements, supporting claims about the flexibility of the pointed arch/ribbed vault system. Bay 1S presents a unique contour map within the range of solutions found in the cathedral’s vaults.



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<sup>1</sup> Robert Branner, *Burgundian Gothic Architecture*, London, 1960, 106-108 dated the beginning of the new west façade to 1235, but subsequent research by the team at the *Centre d'Etudes médiévales* in Auxerre has pushed the likely date about 10 years later.