

IDENTIFICATION

Nomination : Cathedral of St Stephen, Bourges
Location : Département of Cher
State Party : France
Date : 11 October 1991

DESCRIPTION AND HISTORY

There has been a Christian cult centre on this site since the 3rd century AD, when Roman Avaricum became the first Christian community in Gaul. A Romanesque basilica dedicated to St Stephen was erected here in the 11th century and other religious buildings quickly clustered around it. A small crypt from the Romanesque structure has survived beneath the present cathedral.

In the 12th century transepts and a monumental west front were added, but fires in the early 1190s necessitated complete rebuilding (contemporaneously with the main construction of Notre-Dame de Paris). Work began in 1195 and continued throughout the 13th century.

The new cathedral was built to a simple but harmonious plan. It is basilican in form, with chapels surrounding the nave. The perspective of the side walls and the unity of the interior space are outstanding features of the building. The sculptures on the north and south doors and the Last Judgement on the west facade are notable examples of the art of the period. The stained glass is also of exceptionally high quality.

Other historic buildings in the precincts are a 13th century tithe barn, those elements of the 17th century Bishop's Palace which survive as the Hôtel de Ville, and the cathedral gardens in classical French style.

AUTHENTICITY

The structure is essentially as it was when it was completed in the late 13th century, both in form and in materials, although many elements have been replaced over the centuries, as is the case with all Gothic cathedrals.

MANAGEMENT AND PROTECTION

Like all the French cathedrals, Bourges has been maintained regularly for many years by the skilled craftsmen of Monuments Historiques. The most recent campaign began in 1975; forthcoming projects include restoration

of the 15th-17th century glass, the sculptures on the north tower, and the roof of the nave.

It is managed by the Direction du Patrimoine of the Ministry of Culture, Communications, and Public Works through the Direction Régionale des Affaires Culturelles du Centre.

The cathedral is the property of the French State and has been a designated Historical Monument since as early as 1862. Since 1965 the historic centre of Bourges has been a protected area, under the "Malraux Law" of 1962.

EVALUATION

Qualities

Bourges Cathedral is a masterpiece of Gothic architecture. The most noteworthy feature of the structure is probably its integral conception; unlike other great churches of the period, it was conceived and constructed as a whole and not added to piecemeal over many centuries.

Additional comments

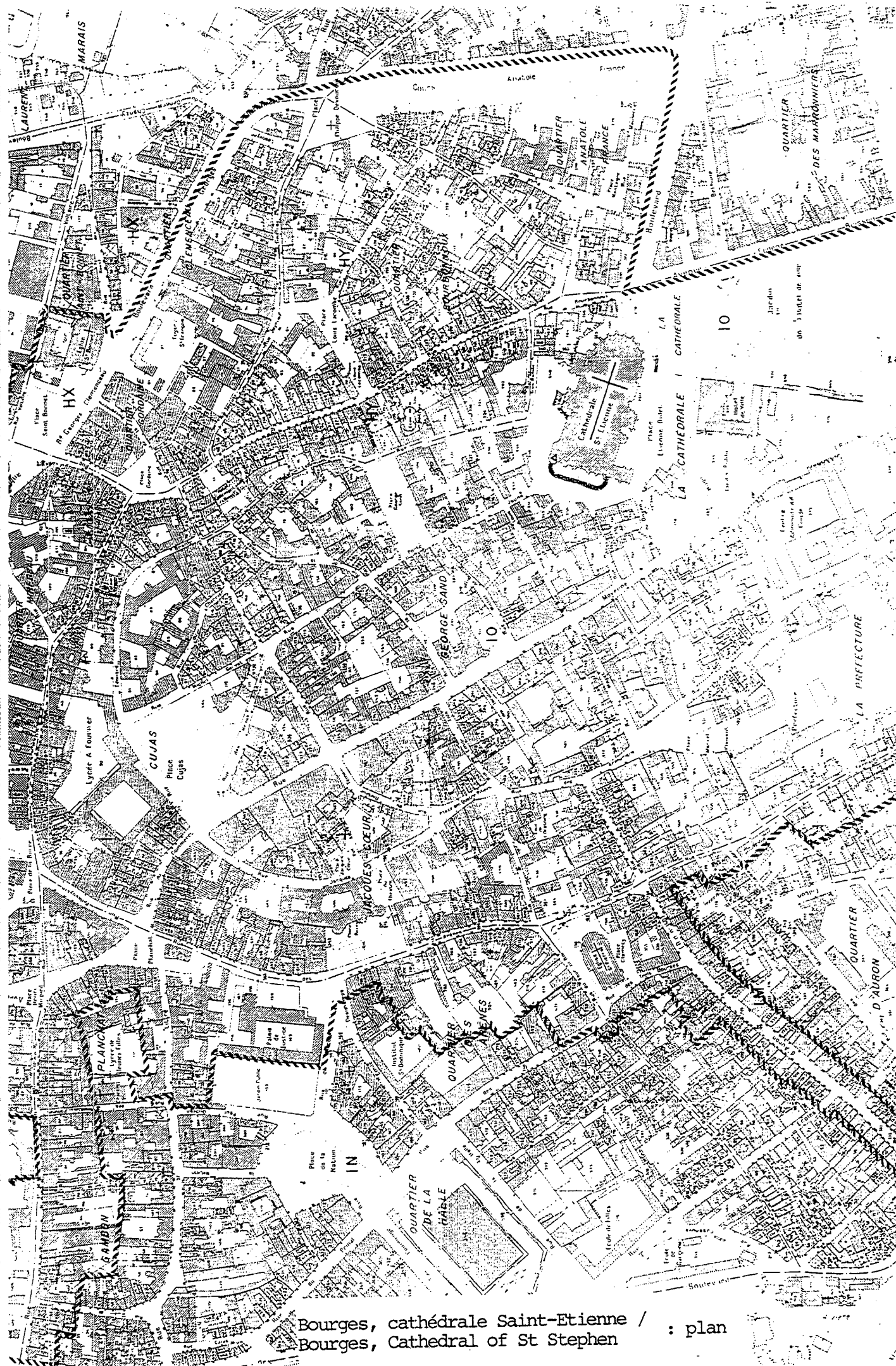
By any criterion Bourges Cathedral is a masterpiece of Gothic architecture. Seen within the context of the French heritage it is clearly of major importance. A leading expert on Gothic architecture consulted by the ICOMOS Bureau pointed out that it lies outside the mainstream of French Gothic, represented by St Denis, Laon, Paris, Chartres, Reims, and Amiens. He describes it as "a magnificent digression" but concedes that it influenced European cathedrals that are architecturally less distinguished than itself, such as Le Mans, Coutances, and Toledo. However, he had no hesitation in stating that "Bourges ranks as one of the greatest Gothic cathedrals."

Five ICOMOS Bureau Members had personal knowledge of the cathedral and were unanimous in supporting the expert's concluding remark. In their opinion its absence from the World Heritage List could be seen as prejudicial to the status of the List.

ICOMOS RECOMMENDATION

That this cultural property be included on the World Heritage List on the basis of Criterion i.

- **Criterion i** : Bourges Cathedral is of considerable importance in the development of Gothic architecture and as a symbol of the strength of Christianity in medieval France. However, its principal claim lies in its striking beauty, combining masterly management of space with harmonious proportions and decoration of the highest quality.



Bourges, cathédrale Saint-Etienne / : plan
 Bourges, Cathedral of St Stephen