

The Ile-de-la-Cité

The seat of royal power

In the 1st century BC, the Parisii, a Gallic tribe, settled on an island in the middle of the River Seine, later known as the Ile-de-la-Cité, and founded the town of Lutetia, which in the 5th century took the name of Paris. In the 6th century Clovis, the first French King, made the Palais de la Cité his royal residence. His son Childebert had Paris's first cathedral built. At the end of the 10th century, Hugues Capet, the first Capetian king, established his royal council and government in the palace, which thus became the seat of royal power.

A palace deserted by its kings

In 1248, when Louis IX signed the deed founding the Sainte-Chapelle, the nearby Cathedral of Notre-Dame already had its current facade. In 1358, the advisors to King John II (The Good) were assassinated before the eyes of the Dauphin, the future Charles V, who once he became king decided to move to better protected premises, firstly the Hôtel Saint-Pol, one of his Paris residences (no longer standing), then to the Louvre and Vincennes. The royal government, Parliament, Chancery and the Chamber of Accounts remained in the Capetian palace for a while, but as the centuries passed only the law courts and prison stayed on. Nowadays, the Sainte-Chapelle and the Conciergerie are the only visible remains of the oldest palace of the kings of France.

Glossary

Blind arcature: architectural pattern consisting of a set of small cut-out arcades set against a wall and consequently said to be blind.

Boustrophedon: a way of reading from the bottom upwards; alternate lines are read in opposite directions, right to left then left to right.

Capital: engraved or carved stone placed at the top of a pillar. Its widened shape supports the spring of an arch.

Corner piece: triangular surface in the corner of an arcade.

Light: vertical division (glass) of a window.

Relics: parts of a saint's body, or objects that belonged to saints.

Shrine: reliquary, large chest or display case containing one or more saintly relics.

Practical information

Visit takes on average: 1 hour
Special tours for disabled people.



The Centre des monuments nationaux publishes a collection of guidebooks about French monuments, translated into several languages. Éditions du patrimoine publications are on sale in the bookshop-giftshop.

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Sainte-Chapelle

A gem of High Gothic architecture

In the centre of the Ile-de-la-Cité

The Palais de la Cité was the residence and seat of royal power from the 10th to the 14th



centuries, and housed the Conciergerie and Sainte-Chapelle which are now part of the Palace of Justice, the new function of the building. The Sainte-Chapelle was built between 1242 and 1248, in accordance with the wishes of Louis IX (king from 1226 to 1270 and the future Saint Louis) to house the relics* of the Passion of Christ. The most famous of these relics was the Crown of Thorns, acquired in 1239 for a sum that greatly exceeded the cost of building the Chapel itself.

Religious and political influence

The Holy Relics* had belonged to the emperors of Constantinople since the 4th century. In purchasing them, Louis IX added to the prestige of both France and Paris which, in the eyes of medieval Europe, became a "New Jerusalem", and hence the second capital of Christianity. Throughout the revolutionary period, the Sainte-Chapelle, which was a symbol of royalty by divine right, suffered a great deal of damage, although the stained glass windows remained intact. From 1846 onwards, a huge wave of restoration work was carried out on the building, giving it its current appearance.

* Explanations overleaf.

Two sanctuaries, one on top of the other

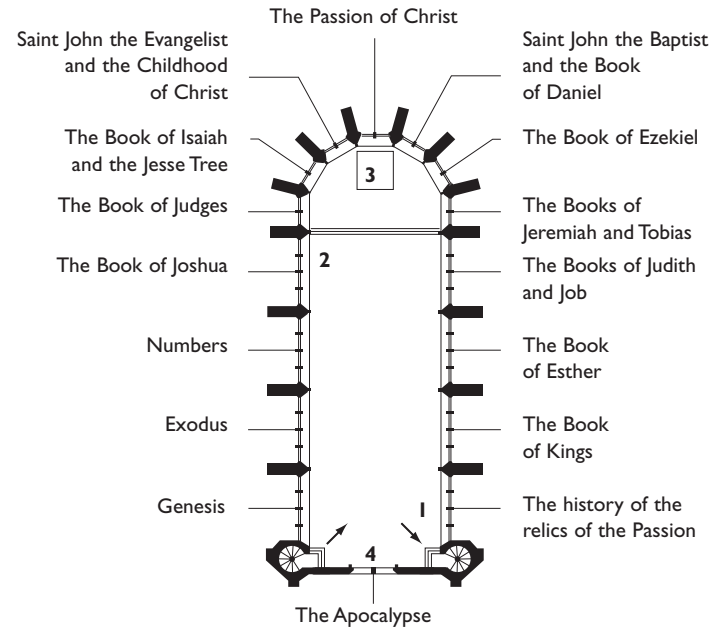
From the beginning, the relics* were displayed and worshipped in the upper chapel. Only the king, his close friends and family, and the canons leading the services entered it via the outdoor terrace, which at the time was connected to the Palace. The lower chapel was the place of worship for the palace staff.

The basilica-type layout with a semi-circular apse was very simple. It was to be used as a model for other Holy Chapels, including those of Vincennes and Châteaudun.

The lower chapel

Visitors are greeted by a statue of the Virgin Mary, the sanctuary's patron saint, at the portal. Inside, the polychrome decoration, like the carved decoration in the porch, dates back to the 19th-century restoration work. In the apse on the left, above the door to the former sacristy, is a 13th-century fresco depicting the Annunciation. This is the oldest wall painting in Paris.

The low vault is held up by openwork struts linking the aisle columns to the lateral walls. These walls are decorated with blind* trefoil arcatures and 12 medallions featuring the apostles. The vaults' fleur-de-lys on an azure background are also found on the columns, alternating with the towers on a purple background which were the arms of Queen Blanche of Castile, Louis IX's mother.



Detailed leaflets about the stained glass windows are available at the entrance to the upper chapel.

The Upper Chapel

This is a truly monumental and sumptuously decorated reliquary. Sculptures and windows combine harmoniously to glorify the Passion of Christ and create a feeling of entry into the Heavenly Jerusalem, bathed in light and colour. The Sainte-Chapelle owes much of even its early fame to its stained glass windows.

The 1,113 scenes depicted in the 15 stained glass windows tell the story of mankind from Genesis through to Christ's resurrection. Fourteen of the windows, depicting episodes from the bible, should be read from left to right, from the bottom upwards.

1 The window telling the story of the relics of the Passion is the only one to be read boustrophedonically*. In the lower part of the lights*, it illustrates the tale of the relics, from their discovery by Saint Helen in Jerusalem to their arrival in the kingdom of France.

2 The Statue of Saint Peter is the original, as are 5 other apostle statues. He is holding the keys to heaven. The statues of the 12 apostles, the "pillars of the Church" are symbolically arranged in the nave on the ribbed vault's springing line. They typify the harmony and idealised faces of Parisian sculpture in the years between 1240 and 1260.

3 The great shrine* containing the 22 relics* of the Passion of Christ, including the fragment of the Holy Cross and the Crown of Thorns, used to be displayed on the gallery but was melted down during the Revolution. The remaining relics are now kept in the treasury of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris.

4 The western rose illustrates the prophetic Apocalypse of St John, symbolically represented opposite the Passion of Christ in the choir's central stained glass window. In the centre of the rose, Christ returns in glory at the end of Time to judge the dead and the living.

The 100 foliage-decorated capitals* along the lateral walls are all different. The angels on the corner pieces* of the arcatures echo the 42 martyr scenes featured in the quatrefoils.

* Explanations overleaf.