The Canons of Rouen Cathedral in the Fifteenth Century  
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Rouen is the most important ecclesiastical site in Normandy. Its influence extends from the English Channel on the west, to the outskirts of Paris on the east. However, at the time the cathedral choir stalls were commissioned in the fifteenth century this rich area was just emerging from a long troubled period linked to the Hundred Years War. While Rouen was not under siege, it was subject to heavy taxation and suffered economically. When the English twice closed the Seine, barring commercial traffic, Rouen was impoverished. At the close of the fourteenth century the city was caught between the English and the French regimes.

The terms of the 1419 truce between Rouen and the English, were very difficult but the Rouen citizens were able to keep their businesses and their freedom. They remained English in an English Normandy until 1450. The return to Rouen of Charles VII in 1449 brought further difficult years and the Plague also invaded the city. In spite of these problems the canons of the cathedral surprisingly made plans to replace their old choir stalls. The chapter probably had not unduly suffered under the English occupation since a close supporter of the English was Jean de la Rochetaillée, archbishop of Rouen from 1423 to 1452.

Who were these canons? From the fourth to fifth centuries these clerics formed a corpus around the bishop, caring for various cathedral functions. In the eighth to ninth centuries the canons copied the organization of monastic societies and followed a communal life under diverse rules. However, by the eleventh century the communal life was abandoned. By the fifteenth century the Rouen canons lived a secular life.

How to become a canon. The conditions for becoming a canon varied with the diocese. At Rouen it was not necessary to be a priest, since a canon was not obliged to celebrate the mass. Priesthood was not necessary to sing the psalms or to recite prayers. For most chapters it appears that a canon had to qualify at least as a sub-deacon. Rouen seems to have had no age requirement, but the age of 18 was required for sub-deacons and 25 for a priest. Some chapters, but not Rouen, required noble heritage. The only condition at Rouen appears to be legitimacy of birth, although there were Rouen canons born out of wedlock, probably accepted with dispensation by king or pope.
There was a hierarchy in the community and the canon, after an investiture ceremony, could progress to the heart of the chapter. He paid a tax and offered a robe of a certain value. After 1460 a new canon had to pay another tax the Christmas following his reception in the community.

**The prébends.** Each canon had an heir, called a prebend. The prebends each owned property and perhaps a business. Their wealth was unequal whereas the prebends at Amiens cathedral were equal in wealth. A percentage of this wealth was distributed under certain conditions to canons in residence, after their first year in the community, so they could count on a certain income for the year.

**Composition of the chapter of canons at Rouen.** At the end of the Middle Ages, the chapter at Rouen had 51 prebends, including one for the archbishop. The fact that he was considered part of the community may explain why archbishop Guillaume d'Estouteville contributed money for the choir stalls to be used by the canons. Each chapter of canons included a number of honorary dignitaries who were responsible for certain functions. At Rouen these numbered ten: a dean elected by the canons, the master singer responsible for the liturgy, the treasurer who supervised the reliquaries, six archdeacons, and the superintendent of the city schools.

The two directors of the « fabrique », which was responsible for the construction and upkeep of the cathedral and its furnishings, played a great role in the construction of the choir stalls. Chaplains too played important roles, participating in the services, and teaching the children their lessons. In 1413 there were six children in the choir.

**The Activities of the Canons.** The canons' principal activity was participation in communal prayers. They also provided services to the poor, distributed alms, and supervised the operation of the hospital. Several types of chapter meetings were important parts of the canon's life. At daily meetings items under consideration included such things as: a canon's request to leave the community, a question of discipline, conduct of their businesses, accounts. Annual meetings the day following the feast of the Assumption considered important business and elections to cathedral offices. Extraordinary meetings were held as needed for making unique decisions. At Rouen, although not in every chapter, the canons met to select their archbishop. During the war, it was difficult to choose a person for this position that pleased both the French and the English. The canons engaged in other diverse activities. These included religious offices serving the community, the
archbishop or even the king. They might have prebends in other dioceses and therefore might not even live in their diocese.

**Mode of Life of the Canons.** By the fifteenth century the Rouen canons had long abandoned their communal life and lived in a totally secular manner, not taking a vow of poverty but instead managing their businesses. They were supposed to be celibate but were asked above all not to cause scandal, nor to bear arms. When the canons were in the choir they were required to wear their long robes which in summer had long sleeves. In winter they wore sleeveless gowns over furred robes. Over the robe they wore a cape. Tonsured, they wore a horned bonnet and a required scarf held over their left arm which formed a pouch to contain their religious books. A tomb in the cathedral shows a canon in this garb.

**Where did the Canons Live?** At Rouen there seems to be no specific neighborhood where the canons lived. They had individual houses somewhere in the parish. The house could be purchased or rented from a bourgeois of the town. There is no trace today of any communal residence such as a dormitory or a refectory. There are remains of galleries on the north of the cathedral and a cloister on the south. The chapter house, in the fifteenth century, was converted to the book stalls with a staircase to permit circulation by the canons between cathedral and library. In addition to the cathedral library, several canons had their own collections of books.

The Rouen canons in the fifteenth century lived like the other townspeople. It is not surprising, therefore to find a variety of occupations carved on the misericords in the choir. The canons were not prevented from performing pastoral functions. Some worked for nobles and others were politicians. They took exceedingly good care of their church. In that respect the Rouen canons hardly differed from other secular cathedral chapters in the Kingdom of France.