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Abbot Suger's St. Denis and the Cult of Relics

KATHRYN FUNDERBURG

THROUGHOUT the medieval period, pilgrimages to the sites of holy relics were a significant aspect of the Christian faith. Men and women, regardless of their status, could journey to a church possessing the remains of a saint in order to demonstrate their piety, ask for intercession and healing, or they could simply alleviate the monotony of daily life through “spiritual tourism.”¹ By the twelfth century, pilgrimages were so popular that many churches struggled to accommodate the large crowds seeking to be in the presence of the sacred relics, and, although many medieval churches were already built as processional spaces, the significant influx of pilgrims threatened to disrupt clerical activities.² The French abbey church of St. Denis, located outside of Paris, was facing the same overcrowding problems that many churches along the major pilgrimage routes in France and Northern Spain sought to remedy. The growing cult of relics served as an impetus for Abbot Suger (1081-1151) to renovate St. Denis, ushering in the transition from Romanesque architecture to a consolidated Gothic style.

1 Richard Kieckhefer, “The Impact of Architecture,” in *Medieval Christianity*, ed. Daniel Bornstein (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2010), 140.

2 Kieckhefer, “Impact of Architecture,” 137–138.

The abbey church of St. Denis dates back to the late fifth century and was originally built to house the relics of St. Denis, a bishop martyred on his mission to convert the Gauls in the third century.³ Due to his sacrifice and legends of miraculous events surrounding his death, St. Denis is considered to be the first Bishop of Paris and the patron saint of France.⁴ Despite possessing the highly venerated relics of St. Denis, the abbey did not become one of the most “powerful institutions in Medieval France” until the sixth century, when the French kings began to be buried at the church.⁵ By 1122, when King Louis VI appointed Suger abbot, St. Denis was the royal abbey and one of the foremost pilgrimage sites in Europe, powerful and poised for great change.⁶

Indeed, in 1124 the connection between St. Denis and the French monarchy, along with Abbot Suger’s close interaction with Louis VI, brought about the momentous return of several precious relics and the reinstatement of Lendit, a major festival with the potential to attract a vast number of pilgrims.⁷ At the National Assembly of 1124, King Louis VI prayed to St. Denis to protect France against the Germanic invasion, promising great gifts in return for the intercession of the saint.⁸ The king went into battle carrying the banner of St. Denis, which merged in the popular imagination with the oriflamme of Charlemagne, simultaneously strengthening the connection between St. Denis and the legacy of Charlemagne as well as legitimizing the power and authority of the French monarchy through the

3 Robert Scott, “The Initial Vision,” in *The Gothic Enterprise* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 76; Whitney Stoddard, “The Abbey of Saint-Denis,” in *Art & Architecture in Medieval France* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 101.

4 Scott, “The Initial Vision,” 77; Stoddard, “The Abbey of Saint-Denis,” 101.

5 Sumner McKnight Crosby, “Abbot Suger, the Abbey of Saint-Denis, and the New Gothic Style,” in *The Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis In the Time of Abbot Suger*, ed. Ellen Shultz (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981), 13; Scott, “Initial Vision,” 77; Kieckhefer, “The Impact of Architecture,” 140.

6 Otto von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956), 65; Scott, “The Initial Vision,” 78.

7 Scott, “The Initial Vision,” 84.

8 Scott, “Initial Vision,” 80; von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 76.

wielding of the symbol of the saint.⁹

True to his promise, after the threat of conflict passed, Louis VI gave invaluable jewels, not to the abbot or abbey, but directly to the saint himself. By specifying the saint as the recipient of his donation, the king set the example of asking for intercession and giving gifts in reciprocation, a practice that the pilgrims would continue. Their donations would, in part, make the renovation of St. Denis possible. Louis VI also returned all the relics associated with the Passion: a nail from the True Cross and a portion of the Crown of Thorns that were supposedly brought back from Constantinople by Charlemagne.¹⁰ The nail and thorn were originally given to the abbey by Charles the Bald in the ninth century, along with the right to hold an annual feast in honor of the relics, which led to the formation of the fair called Lendit in 1048. In 1109, however, King Louis VI transferred the relics to Notre Dame along with the privilege of hosting the Lendit festival. Therefore, by returning the relics of the Passion, Louis VI not only enhanced the status of St. Denis, he also reinstated the right for the abbey to host Lendit, significantly increasing the number of pilgrims whose donations would enable Abbot Suger to make his Gothic vision a reality.¹¹

In fact, it appears as though Abbot Suger began planning for the rebuilding of the church directly after the events of 1124.¹² Empowered by the abbey's rising income and compelled to adapt the inadequately spacious structure to meet the need of the multitudes traveling to St. Denis—Suger writes about pilgrims being so crowded that distressed women were “lifted...above the heads of the crowd, [and] marched forward as though on pavement”—the abbot began fundraising for the project only half a year after the royal proclamation of 1124.¹³ The building did not begin, however,

9 Scott, “The Initial Vision,” 81; von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 75; Stoddard, “The Abbey of Saint-Denis,” 104.

10 Kieckhefer, “Impact of Architecture,” 140; Scott, “The Initial Vision,” 77; Stoddard, “The Abbey of Saint-Denis,” 104.

11 Scott, “The Initial Vision,” 84; von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 78.

12 Von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 91.

13 Scott, “The Initial Vision,” 85; von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 92.

until thirteen years later, in 1137.¹⁴ Abbot Suger served as one of King Louis VI's most important counselors and was heavily occupied with the affairs of state, leaving little time for other undertakings until the king's death in 1137.¹⁵

In 1137, work finally began on the west façade, where the dilapidated Carolingian sanctuary, with its narrow passages into the church, was torn down.¹⁶ Suger's façade was built with three portals with "ample enough room to allow clergy and laity to circulate freely on the great festivals of the abbey."¹⁷ Massive buttresses divide the west front into three distinct sections, with the large central portal and its tympanum (depicting the Last Judgment) serving as the focal point, demonstrating a new level of unity between architecture and sculpture by creating a thematic dialogue between the two elements.¹⁸ The composition of the tympanum itself was a departure from the often crowded and chaotic Romanesque rendering of the Last Judgment. At St. Denis, Christ sits in front of a cross with his arms outstretched, flanked by the Virgin Mary and the Apostles who act as intercessors for mankind.¹⁹ The symmetrical clarity of the iconographic image would have made the message of the tympanum apparent to all those who entered St. Denis.²⁰ The surrounding jamb figures of the Wise and Foolish Virgins continue the synthesis of architecture and sculpture as well as the theme of the Last Judgment depicted in the tympanum.²¹ Another innovative addition to the west front is the rose window, a feature which would be

14 Scott, "The Initial Vision," 85; von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 92.

15 Scott, "The Initial Vision," 85; von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 93.

16 Von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 98–99.

17 Von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 98–99.

18 Stoddard, "The Abbey of Saint-Denis," 104.

19 Charles T. Little, "Monumental Sculpture at Saint-Denis Under the Patronage of Abbot Suger: The West Facade and The Cloister," in *The Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis In the Time of Abbot Suger*, ed. Ellen Shultz (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981), 25.

20 Von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 113.

21 Little, "Monumental Sculpture at Saint-Denis," 26; Stoddard, "The Abbey of Saint-Denis," 106.

come a notable aspect of the Gothic style. As a whole, St. Denis's west façade can be interpreted as the *porta caeli*, or gateway to heaven, where the art is used in an anagogical manner to symbolize the transition from the earthly to the eternal and prepare the mind to receive the truth.²²

In addition to the new west façade, Suger also constructed a large narthex comprised of two bays and three aisles on the ground level with three large chapels positioned above.²³ The new narthex was covered by cross-ribbed vaults, expanding upon the architectural achievement first utilized in late eleventh-century structures such as Durham Cathedral, to create an airier, vertically elongated space.²⁴ Since Abbot Suger believed that the original Carolingian nave and transept had been built by King Dagobert and blessed by a crowd of angels and Christ himself, the central section of the church was left untouched.²⁵ The new construction on the west end, however, was able to create more interior space to accommodate the growing crowds, lengthening the nave by about forty percent.²⁶

Following the erection of the new west front, construction shifted to the eastern end of St. Denis, where what would become one of the most iconic examples of Gothic architecture was soon to be built: Suger's choir. Completed rapidly over the span of only three years and three months, the choir was consecrated on June 14, 1144.²⁷ Doubling the size of the Carolingian apse, the choir, with its surrounding double ambulatory and seven chapels, was designed to be an open space full of light.²⁸ The increased dimensions of the choir allowed the pilgrims to circulate through the church and

22 Von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 113 and 115; Stoddard, "The Abbey of Saint-Denis," 106.

23 Von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 99.

24 Stoddard, "The Abbey of Saint-Denis," 106.

25 Crosby, "Abbot Suger," 17.

26 Von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 99.

27 Stoddard, "The Abbey of Saint-Denis," 106.

28 Von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 99; Stoddard, "The Abbey of Saint-Denis," 108.

access the relics without trampling others or disturbing the service.²⁹ The choir was illuminated by two windows in each chapel that were so expansive they made the walls appear to be solely glass.³⁰ Such an illusion was made possible through the use of sturdy buttresses that faced outward rather than inward, minimizing their visibility from within the choir.³¹ The density and darkness of the Romanesque style were abandoned for soaring rib vaults, pointed arches, delicate columns, and grand windows—features that would later be recognized as key elements of Gothic architecture—which were purposefully formed to maximize the lightness and radiance of the space.

Abbot Suger fervently believed in the metaphysical properties of light, according to which the physical light entering into the church would become the divine light of Christ with the power to illuminate the mind and spirit and encourage a greater understanding of religious truth.³² Although Suger credited his understanding of the transformative power of light to the writings of St. Denis, the texts were actually written by Dionysius the Areopagite who was widely conflated with the national saint during the Middle Ages.³³ The rebuilding of St. Denis can be understood as an architectural expression of Dionysian theology driven by a desire for the illumination of Christ’s message of salvation in the form of earthly light.³⁴ The abbot’s belief in the uplifting power of light resulted in the choir being designed with the immense stained glass windows, which Suger called “most sacred.”³⁵

Beyond their value in admitting light, the windows also served as a means of conveying biblical narrative to the pilgrims, as well as typologi-

29 Kieckhefer, “Impact of Architecture,” 140.

30 Stoddard, “The Abbey of Saint-Denis,” 108.

31 Stoddard, “The Abbey of Saint-Denis,” 108.

32 Stoddard, “The Abbey of Saint-Denis,” 101.

33 Von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 103; Stoddard, “The Abby of Saint-Denis,” 101.

34 Von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 120; Stoddard, “The Abbey of Saint-Denis,” 101 and 108.

35 Von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 120; Stoddard, “The Abbey of Saint-Denis,” 101 and 108.

cal or political messages.³⁶ The stained glass windows in the central chapel depict the Tree of Jesse, one of the first developed iterations of the image, and the Infancy of Christ, making the iconographic theme in the chapel the Incarnation, “with its revelation in the Old Testament by Isaiah and its manifestation in the New Testament through the Gospels.”³⁷ The Tree of Jesse symbolizes the genealogy of Christ with the trunk of the tree springing from Jesse’s side and the ancestors of Jesus—the kings—ascending towards the Virgin Mary and Christ who resides above her.³⁸ Because of the newly placed emphasis on the kings in the St. Denis Tree of Jesse, it is speculated that the window “had political overtones, glorifying the abbey itself and its ties with the French monarchy.”³⁹ A window depicting the Life of Moses also highlights the typological and anagogical layers of the images.⁴⁰ Moses appears blindfolded before the Israelites, an iconographic scene that St. Paul used to contrast “between the ‘veiled’ truth of the Old Testament and the ‘unveiled’ truth of the New,” stressing the Dionysian idea of divine light revealing the true message of Christ.⁴¹

Ultimately, Abbot Suger’s rebuilding of St. Denis can be attributed to the growing cult of relics on several levels. The relics of St. Denis, Christ’s Passion, and the French kings drew pilgrims to the church in such great numbers that the building needed to be expanded to accommodate them.

The donations given by the pilgrims enabled the building of the new west and east ends. Even the design for the abbey was heavily influenced by texts on the metaphysical properties of light, which Suger believed to be written by St. Denis. The architectural innovations pioneered at St. Denis

36 Jane Hayward, “Stained Glass at Saint-Denis,” in *The Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis in the Time of Abbot Suger*, ed. Ellen Shultz (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981), 63; von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 121.

37 Hayward, “Stained Glass,” 63 and 72.

38 Hayward, “Stained Glass,” 72.

39 Hayward, “Stained Glass,” 72.

40 Hayward, “Stained Glass,” 63.

41 Von Simson, *Gothic Cathedral*, 121–122.

were utilized because they served to illuminate and allow access to the relics while lifting the minds of the pilgrims towards heavenly contemplation, forming what is now understood to be the foundation of the Gothic style.

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