

# Symbiotic Relationships: Abbot Suger and the Capetian Monarchy at Saint-Denis

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It is beyond debate that in modern discussions of Romanesque and Gothic art the abbey church of Saint-Denis, built under the leadership of Abbot Suger, stands at a transitional point. Traditionally, this status has been prescribed due to the organization, structure, and style of the building's twelfth-century façade and choir.<sup>1</sup> Yet, an investigation into the evidence reveals that the structure is more complex. Placing the monument within the context of its historical moment reveals the subtlety of Suger's Saint-Denis. As a whole, the building, its artistic embellishment, and contents provide valuable insight into the developments of Gothic spaces and the fundamental role of Suger's patronage. This furthers modern comprehension of the site not just as a pivotal point between Romanesque and Gothic, but as the result of a unique flourishing of purposeful creative activity during the time of Suger's abbacy.

Narrowing the scope of this investigation, a focus on the development of metalwork in conjunction with stone sculpture at this monastic center reveals a more subtle understanding of the functions decoration could serve. The interaction between the west façade sculptural program and liturgical vessels commissioned for use within sheds light on the ways Suger used material objects to enhance the position of the Capetian monarchy and the abbey. Under the leadership of Suger, Saint-Denis became the focal point for intense artistic activity. This singular occurrence, combined with a distinctive emphasis on the patronage of one man and Suger's written commentary on his

'creation,' places Saint-Denis in the forefront of artistic innovation c. 1140.

Although Suger did not explicitly discuss stone sculpture in his existing writings, sculpture played a vital role in his concept of the church of Saint-Denis.<sup>2</sup> The sculpture on the portals would not have been perceived as new or unique, perhaps explaining why Suger did not devote attention to chronicling their existence or iconography. On the other hand, the liturgical vessels were a featured aspect of the abbey church's decoration, in both their fabrication and donation. I propose that there are meaningful visual ties between these objects and the sculptural embellishments of the church which reflect their symbiotic roles. An examination of text and image leads to illuminating insights into subtle purposes of art at Saint-Denis under Abbot Suger.

Between 1120 and 1150, Saint-Denis, already situated at the pinnacle of French monastic prestige, emerged into the full light of royal prominence. This increase in status resulted from multiple factors, all of which provide a context for the development of art at the abbey. Scholars, such as Gabrielle Spiegel and Sumner Crosby, have charted both the historical and architectural growth of the abbey from its origin through the period of concern here.<sup>3</sup> Primarily, the church commemorated the burial place of France's patron saint, Saint Denis, martyred in Paris in the 3rd century. As the saint's popularity grew among inhabitants of the Île-de-France, Saint Denis gained the title "Apostle of Gaul." This title amplified the abbey church as a site of holy

I would like to thank Jaroslav Folda and Dorothy Verkerk for their valuable contributions in helping to prepare this paper for presentation.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Polk discusses traditional perceptions of the church and its impact on chronological and archaeological grounds in his published dissertation. Thomas Polk, *Saint-Denis, Noyon and the Early Gothic Choir: Methodological Considerations for the History of Early Gothic Architecture* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Peter D. Lang, 1982). This thesis will not address ideas of dating or explore detailed comparisons with other contemporary structures, such as Noyon and Chartres. Polk's dissertation does examine these ideas and provides insight into the traditional conceptions of Saint-Denis. For general and comprehensive discussions of the Abbey Church of Saint-Denis, its history, and structure, see: Pamela Z. Blum, *Early Gothic Saint-Denis: Restorations and Survivals* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1992); Sumner McKnight Crosby, *The Royal Abbey of Saint Denis from Its Beginnings to the Death of Suger, 475-1151*, ed. Pamela Z. Blum (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987); Paula Gerson, *The West Facade of St-Denis: An Iconographic Study* (Diss, Columbia University, 1970); Paula Gerson, ed., *Abbot Suger and Saint-Denis: A Symposium* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of

Art, 1986); Erwin Panofsky, *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St-Denis and Its Art Treasures*, second edition, ed. Gerda Panofsky-Soergel (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979); Conrad Rudolph, *Artistic Change at St-Denis: Abbot Suger's Program and the Early Twelfth-Century Controversy over Art* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Suger's corpus includes three treatises, *Liber de rebus in administratione sua gestis*, *Libellus alter de consecratione ecclesiae sancti Dionysii*, and the *Ordinatio AD MCXL vel MCXLI confirmata*, on the reform and functioning of the abbey and the renovation of the church, as well as a biography of Louis VI, *Vita Ludovici Grossi*. In addition, he began a biography of Louis VII. For the first three texts, I have used Erwin Panofsky's translation; it should be noted that this translation is abridged. See Panofsky, 1979. The biography of Louis VI was recently translated by Richard Cusimano and John Moorhead, *The Deeds of Louis the Fat* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992). For a more comprehensive discussion of the literary tradition at Saint-Denis, see Gabrielle Spiegel, *The Chronicle Tradition of Saint-Denis: A Survey* (Brookline, MA: Classical Folia Editions, 1978).

pilgrimage and recipient of religious fervor. The rulers of the Île-de-France seized on the legends surrounding Saint Denis, weaving a close relationship between their dynasties and the saint. The belief in specific royal and national protection by Saint Denis culminated under Louis VI when he declared the saint the patron of the state and second only to God as the protector of France. Suger recorded this relationship in his *Vita Ludovici Grossi*, writing:

Then he [Louis VI] hurried to the blessed Dionysius, for common report and frequent experience had taught him that he was the particular patron and, after God, the foremost protector of the realm. Offering prayers and gifts, he begged him from the bottom of his heart to defend the kingdom, to keep safe his person, and to resist the enemy in his customary way. For the French have a special privilege from him.<sup>4</sup>

Suger's authorship of this text should not be understated; he could only gain from emphasizing connections between the Capetians and the saint whose relics he guarded. This text is also indicative of Suger and Louis' joint efforts to establish and solidify the Capetian monarchy and the supporting role of the abbey.

Saint-Denis could assert its status as the preeminent royal abbey from 1124 onward. The ties forged between the Abbey and the rulers of the Île-de-France began with royal burials at the abbey, architectural patronage, and the effort to claim the protection of the "Apostle of Gaul." Under the supervision of Suger, these ties were manifested in visual and ideological associations between the Capetians and Saint Denis. In turn, this alliance provided sacred endorsement for Capetian claims to the rulership of France. By enforcing this symbiotic relationship, Suger also emphasized the abbey's position as a religious center of the nascent state. In an effort to increase the status and power of his church, while simultaneously stabilizing and advancing the Capetian dynasty, Suger established himself as an influential figure in France and a prominent patron of the arts.

From the beginning of his abbacy in 1122, Suger worked to reform and renovate the abbey of Saint-Denis. The artistic elements of this are most clear; his writings regarding this pro-

cess also provide valuable evidence for an examination of his efforts. Three main texts relating to the abbey and its renovation survive: the *Ordinatio ad MCXL vel MCXLI confirmata*, the *Libellus alter de consecratione ecclesiae sancti Dionysii*, and *De rebus in administratione sua gestis*.<sup>5</sup> Gabrielle Spiegel discusses the formation of a chronicle tradition at Saint-Denis into which Suger's texts fit neatly. These writings attempt to record the actions of and legitimize the monarchy, inform future leaders, and interpret the fundamental role of the Capetians in the future of the French state.<sup>6</sup> Of these, *De Consecratione* and *De Administratione* most directly address the contribution of visual arts in the construction of the church. In the introduction to his translation of Suger's writings, Erwin Panofsky discusses Suger and his work, noting Suger's tireless interest in the art he commissioned.<sup>7</sup> In presenting the issue of patronage, Panofsky substitutes Suger for the artist, creating an image of the abbot which has survived a great deal of modern scholarship. Suger occupies the role of creative genius, and Panofsky does not explore the ulterior motives for Suger's patronage. It is to this task that I would like to turn now.

In his discussion of art objects, Suger focuses primarily on liturgical vessels and interior decoration of the church. Danielle Gaborit-Chopin presents several rationalizations for Suger's obsession with these material objects. Above all these are beautiful items for the service of God, without which the liturgy could not be performed.<sup>8</sup> Beyond the liturgical, Suger was not only engaged with these precious vessels on an aesthetic and emotional level, but he also desired his church to surpass all others in terms of lavish furnishings.<sup>9</sup> Of the many works he describes, several have notable 12th century origins, and were donated by either Suger or a member of the Capetian family. Suger writes in *De Administratione*:

Also, with the devotion due to the blessed Denis, we acquired vessels of gold as well as of precious stones for the service of the Table of God. . . Still another vase, looking like a pint bottle of beryl or crystal, which the Queen of Aquitaine had presented to our Lord King Louis as a newly wed bride on their first voyage, and the king to us as a tribute of his great love, we offered most affectionately to the Divine Table for libation. . .

<sup>3</sup> Spiegel, *Chronicle*, 1978; Gabrielle Spiegel, "The Cult of Saint Denis and Capetian Kingship," *Journal of Medieval History* 14 (1975): 314-325; Crosby, 1987. For a general treatment of both historical and artistic developments at the abbey of Saint-Denis see also: Gerson, 1970; Gerson, 1986; Panofsky, 1979, 1-37 and 141-259; Rudolph, 1990; and Otto von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral: Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1956).

<sup>4</sup> Cusimano and Moorhead, 1992, 128.

<sup>5</sup> The titles of these treatises translate as: *Ordinance enacted in the year 1140 or in the year 1141, The other little book on the consecration of the church of Saint-Denis*, and *On what was done under his (Suger's) administration*. For the text of these, and a commentary, see Panofsky, 1979.

<sup>6</sup> Spiegel, *Chronicle*, 1978, 39-40, 44-52.

<sup>7</sup> Panofsky, 1979, 1-37.

<sup>8</sup> Danielle Gaborit-Chopin, "Suger's Liturgical Vessels," in Gerson, 1986, 282-293. Theophilus also uses this rationale for the creation of lavish objects, see Theophilus, *De Diversis Artibus*, C.R. Dodwell, trans. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) 61-64. For general discussions of Suger's metalwork, see Gaborit-Chopin, in Gerson, 1986; William Wixom, "Traditional Forms in Suger's Contributions to the Treasury of Saint-Denis," in Gerson, 1986, 295-304; Blaise Montesquiou-Fezensac, and Danielle Gaborit-Chopin, *Le Trésor de Saint-Denis* (Paris: Editions A et J Picard, 1977).

<sup>9</sup> Gaborit-Chopin, in Gerson, 1986, 281-283; Panofsky, 1979, 65.



We also procured for the services at the afore-said altar a precious chalice out of one solid sardonyx. . .<sup>10</sup>

The first object mentioned, today known as the Eleanor Vase, consists of a cut rock-crystal vial, mounted in a gold and jeweled setting (Figure 1). An inscription on the base of the vase reads, "As a bride, Eleanor gave this vase to King Louis, Mitadolus to her grandfather, the King to me, and Suger to the Saints."<sup>11</sup> The second object is perhaps the most famous item of the treasury from Saint-Denis, the chalice of Abbot Suger (Figure 2). The Chalice was constructed from a sardonyx cup, enveloped in a gold, bejeweled mount.<sup>12</sup> The cup itself is probably Alexandrian of the Ptolemaic period. Remounting these ancient vessels as liturgical furnishings was not an uncommon practice, as is evident from Suger's penchant for this activity.<sup>13</sup> An inscription, "Suger Abbas," has been removed from the chalice.

As Suger's comments about these objects indicate, he intended these precious vessels for the main altar of Saint Denis, in the choir of the church. The Eleanor vase would have held wine or water, prior to pouring into a chalice.<sup>14</sup> The chalice would have held the wine to be elevated at the climax of the Eucharistic rite. In addition to their functional import, these two vessels merited specific attention from the abbot in his writings. Although this results, in part, from the aesthetic appeal which they held for Suger, it is not unlikely that they were also important because of their donors. Suger himself gave the chalice, and his writings indicate particular concern for his own contributions to the abbey. Similarly, the Eleanor vase came from the king himself. It stands as a mark of continuous patronage at Saint-Denis by the rulers of the Île-de-France.

Turning to the west façade sculpture and the themes shown there, there is little written record of these portals, aside from Suger's comment regarding the placement of the Carolingian

doors on the left portal, "beneath the mosaic which, though contrary to modern custom, we ordered to be executed there and to be affixed to the tympanum of the portal."<sup>15</sup> All three portals suffered damage during the French Revolution; what remains, however, provides valuable clues as to the original messages of the program. So we must base our understanding of the western sculptures on the extensive archaeological work of Sumner Crosby and Pamela Blum, as well as the iconographic interpretations of Paula Gerson's publications.<sup>16</sup> The west façade encompasses three decorated portals, which mirror the internal organization of the church. As they would have appeared after Suger's renovation, the left portal contained a mosaic tympanum of an unknown subject and sculpture on the archivolt and door jambs (Figure 3). The central door sculpture represented the Last Judgment on narrative and symbolic levels (Figure 4). The third, right entrance depicted the three imprisoned saints preparing for their imminent martyrdom (Figure 5).

Column statues, which no longer exist, occupied the outer jambs of all three portals. These figures are known through drawings published in Bernard de Montfaucon's book on French Royal Monuments.<sup>17</sup> The actual identification of these statues is uncertain, but it has been suggested that they are Old Testament kings, queens, prophets and patriarchs.<sup>18</sup> Adolf Katzenellenbogen examines these statues and their meaning in detail, ultimately concluding that the statues visually articulate the relation of *regnum* and *sacerdotium*, or royal and sacred authority, with a special emphasis on *regnum*. The statues provide a visible Old Testament foundation for the Christian Church, illustrate a spiritual precedent for the Capetian rulers, and exemplify a harmonious relationship between secular and spiritual leaders.<sup>19</sup>

Looking specifically at the left portal, a bust of Christ appears in the center of the upper archivolt, flanked by angels, his outstretched hands holding a book and a flowering scepter. Be-

<sup>10</sup> Panofsky, 1979, 79.

<sup>11</sup> George Beech reconstructs the origins of this chalice, to decipher how it came into Suger's possession. The origins of the vase are not the focus here, although his discussions are of interest. For a specific discussion of this object, see George T. Beech, "The Eleanor of Aquitaine Vase, William IX of Aquitaine, and Muslim Spain," *Gesta* 32 (1993): 3-10; George T. Beech, "The Eleanor of Aquitaine Vase: Its Origins and History to the Early Twelfth Century," *Ars Orientalis* 22 (1992): 69-79; Gerson, 1970, 283; Crosby 1981, 102.

<sup>12</sup> For a general discussion of the chalice, and its provenance see Rudolf Distelberger et al., *Western Decorative Arts, Part I: The Collection of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1993) 4-12, and Montesquiou-Fezensac, cat 71. For an analysis of Suger's chalice see also, Philippe Verdier, "The Chalice of Abbot Suger," *Studies in the History of Art* 24 (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1990): 9-29.

<sup>13</sup> Distelberger, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Beech, 1992, 74; Distelberger, 7; Verdier, 1990, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Panofsky, 1979, 47. The doors mentioned here are the Carolingian donation of the monk, Airardus. The inclusion and mention of the mosaic

can, perhaps, be seen as a manifestation of Suger's recorded concern for the comparison of his abbey with the churches of Constantinople. Panofsky, 1979, 65. This comparison would be based on medium, not necessarily on the subject matter of the image.

<sup>16</sup> I would like to thank Paula Gerson for pointing out the need to be extremely cautious in interpreting the iconography and meaning of the heavily restored portal sculptures. Both Crosby and Blum provide detailed discussions of the original and restored sculpture. See Crosby, 1987, and Blum, 1992. Blum presents images which indicate nineteenth-century insets, in her publications. Unless noted below, the elements which I will discuss are either twelfth-century sculpture or iconographically justified by sculpture fragments, according to Blum's observations.

<sup>17</sup> These drawings are reproduced in Crosby, 1987, figs. 84, 85, and 87-89.

<sup>18</sup> Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *The Sculptural Programs of Chartres Cathedral* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1959) 27-37; Gerson, 1970, 140-161; Crosby, 1987, 192-201.

<sup>19</sup> Katzenellenbogen, 27-37.

low, to the left and right, stand figures identified as Moses and Aaron. This group of three figures again alludes to the relationship between *regnum* and *sacerdotium*. Moses, recipient of the law, was the temporal leader of his people; Aaron was the first priest and a type for ecclesiastical leadership.<sup>20</sup> With this, the archivolt presents the relationship between Old Testament church and state, an antecedent for the ties between Saint-Denis and the Capetians. Who would have been inspired to surpass Aaron and Moses, but Suger, as abbot of the religious center of the emerging nation, and the Capetian monarchs?

Moving to the right portal, the sculpture, although restored, reflects the original twelfth-century iconography and composition.<sup>21</sup> The tympanum depicts the Communion of the three martyrs; in this miraculous occurrence, Christ himself administers the Eucharist to the imprisoned Christians. Christ and the angels are separated from the earthly sphere by a strata of clouds, over which Christ reaches to offer the Eucharistic wafer to Saint Denis, standing in the center and wearing clerical garb. An altar rises above the prison walls surrounding the Saint and his companions; a chalice sits upon this draped altar.

The adaptation of the Eucharist scene to monumental imagery can be explained on several levels. This representation would glorify Saint Denis, and correspondingly, the abbey church dedicated to him. Above all, this image would emphasize the Eucharistic rite.<sup>22</sup> In so doing, the viewer would be impressed with a foretaste of the sacred events which would occur inside the church.

The central portal represents Christ in a bipartite role as Son of God, enthroned within a mandorla, and Son of Man, with his upper body symbolically positioned upon the cross.<sup>23</sup> Above Christ, angels carry the instruments of the Passion. To his left and right, below the arms of the cross, sit the Apostles; Mary is also shown to Christ's right.<sup>24</sup> To the proper right of Christ's feet, the figure of Abbot Suger crouches in adoration. In addition, Suger records a lintel inscription, "Receive, O stern Judge, the prayers of Thy Suger; Grant that I be mercifully numbered among Thy own sheep."<sup>25</sup> The damned and saved appear on the inner archivolt; the outer archivolt represents the twenty four Elders, with the Trinity at the center.

It has been shown that both the liturgical vessels and the portal sculpture each demonstrate sacred and secular concerns. Above and beyond their thematic conjunction the two media

may be tied visually as well. On the central door, the twenty four elders carry vase shaped vials with banding across the top, not 'golden bowls' as in Revelation 5:8, which reads, "when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty four elders fell before the lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints." (Revelation 5:8). As Gaborit-Chopin and Philippe Verdier observed, the carved vessels appearing at Saint-Denis (Figure 4) bear a remarkable similarity to the Eleanor Vase.<sup>26</sup> The manifestation of this treasured object in the portal sculpture can be read as evidence for Suger's preoccupation with the lavish liturgical vessels he collected for the church.

Extending this observation, liturgical objects appear elsewhere in the stone sculpture; on the right portal tympanum, a chalice rests on the altar where Saints Denis, Rusticus, and Eleutherius receive Communion (Figure 5). Although the sculpted chalice lacks handles, which would make it more visually similar to Suger's chalice, I would argue that there is a visual connection being made.<sup>27</sup> The probable existence of polychromy and gilding on these portals would reinforce this connection. Like the symbolic comparison between the image of communion on the south tympanum of the church and the actual event occurring inside, a parallel can be made between the physical altars and liturgical objects of the abbey, and those represented on the west façade.

Suger seems to have been a savvy politician and leader, working energetically to achieve the status he thought his abbey and the monarchy deserved within contemporary perceptions. There seems to be no reason to discount his desire to construct a visual manifestation of this status. Suger's efforts ultimately appear, specifically and symbolically, in the artistic and verbal products of his work at the abbey. What drives the visual associations between church and monarchy, and liturgical and sculpted objects, are their textual echo in Suger's writings. Educated secular viewers, members of the aristocracy and royalty, would certainly have comprehended both the images and their symbolism dealing specifically with *regnum* and *sacerdotium*, royal and sacred authority. These viewers, too, would have been the main audience for Suger's historical writings. Moreover, both the art and writings would set an example of support for the monarchy for monks at Saint-Denis to follow.

<sup>20</sup> Crosby, 1987, 205, and nn. 103, 111; Blum, in Gerson, 1986, 209-218. Blum presents the textual sources and iconography for these sculptures, but does not venture a reason for their inclusion, aside from their ties to Dionysiac philosophy.

<sup>21</sup> Blum indicates that the main figures and composition of the tympanum are original, but the details are nineteenth-century insets or recarvings. Blum, in Gerson, 1986, 206-207.

<sup>22</sup> Crosby, 1987, 210-211.

<sup>23</sup> Blum, 1992, discusses in detail the authenticity of each element of this portal's sculpture.

<sup>24</sup> Crosby suggests that John the Evangelist appears directly to Christ's left evoking a Deësis image. Crosby, 1987, 186.

<sup>25</sup> Panofsky, 1979, 49.

<sup>26</sup> For a photograph of this detail, see Gerson in Gerson, 1986, figs. 8 and 9. Gaborit-Chopin, in Gerson, 1986, 289; Verdier, 1990, 13-14.

<sup>27</sup> This chalice, according to Blum, is a nineteenth-century insert or recarving. She does not indicate whether or not she believes this chalice to be an element of the original iconography. I would posit, however, the existence of a tradition including a chalice in the scene of Saint Denis' last communion. One example of this is a full page miniature from the mid-eleventh century Missal of Saint-Denis, (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. lat. 9436) f. 106v. For a reproduction of this miniature see Jean Porcher, ed. *Les manuscrits à peintures en France du VIIe au XIIIe siècle* (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, 1954) cat 239, plate XXIV.

Despite this, Suger's writings do not directly address this relationship, or articulate this interpretation. Yet, the art produced at the abbey persuasively augments his texts. Ideas of lineage, history, and ties between *regnum* and *sacerdotium* are emphasized by inscriptions, and objects meant to elevate the viewer to the Christian 'truth.' In this case, the truth seems to hold a degree of secular, as well as theological content. What cannot be overtly depicted becomes inscribed through repetition, as in the reappearance of liturgical vessels in the sculpture of the west portals and their inclusion among Suger's writings. The need to defend this luxurious decoration provided a forum for Suger to record the subtle ways in which the art at the abbey worked to serve both sacred theological and secular monarchical aims. A closer reading of the portals, metalwork, and Suger's writings illustrates this relationship, especially when considered in conjunction with what we know about the abbey of Saint-Denis, its history, and its role within the context of the Île-de-France between 1122 and 1151, the year of Suger's death.

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Figure 1. Eleanor Vase, rock crystal, gold, and gems, height 14 1/16 inches (35.7 cm), 1135-1140, Musée du Louvre, Paris, MC 340. © Photo RMN.





Figure 2. Chalice of the Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis, sardonyx, gilded silver, and gems, height 7 1/4 inches (18.4 cm), diameter at base 4 5/8 inches (11.7 cm), diameter at top 4 7/8 inches (12.4 cm), 1137-1140, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Widener Collection. (Photograph © Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.)



Figure 3. Left Portal, stone, 1135-1140, Abbey Church of Saint-Denis, France. (Photo: Elizabeth S. Hudson)





Figure 4. Central Portal, stone, 1135-1140, Abbey Church of Saint-Denis, France. (Photo: Author). The carved vessels are held by seated figures in the three outer archivolt and can be noted here in the right hands of the bottom-most figures in the second and third archivolt on the right side of this image. (Photo: Elizabeth S. Hudson)



Figure 5. Right Portal, stone, 1135-1140, Abbey Church of Saint-Denis, France. (Photo: Elizabeth S. Hudson)