# Monasticism and the Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis
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The Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis in the time of Abbot Suger emerged in a historical moment of tenuous balance. Poised between the decline of monasticism, the rise of urban centers, and a market-based economy, the abbey under Suger existed simultaneously with the emergence of bureaucratic secularism, the Cistercian and Gregorian controversies, and warring forces of ideology and skepticism. At this critical juncture, Saint-Denis struggled to maintain a balance between church and state, between a monasticism of resistance and a monasticism of reaction, and, ultimately, between the past and the future.

## Saint-Denis and the French Monarchy

Saint-Denis seems to occupy a curious place in French history: never has there been a church so revered and yet so reviled. Although the Abbey suffered many cycles of damage and restoration, no event was as destructive as the Revolution of 1789, most notably upon the crypt and the three great bronze doors, which were melted down.[1] Reverence for the church, however, began very early on. The first monarch to be buried at Saint-Denis was Queen Arnegonde in 570, just outside the western entrance.[2] The burial of Queen Arnegonde in the sixth century started a long tradition of royal burials, particularly of several noteworthy Merovingian kings, although no specific reason is known why they

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[1] Sumner Crosby, *The Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 187.
[2] *Ibid*, 280.

chose to be buried there.[3]  In the seventh century, King Dagobert I and his son Clovis II gave

the church its monastic standing.  It was rebuilt in the eighth century as one of the first

great Carolingian abbeys, and dedicated in 775 before Charlemagne and his court. By 867

Saint-Denis became a royal abbey and Charles the Bald took on the title of lay abbot to give

the Abbey more protection during the Norman raids. However, even by this time, Saint-

Denis had long been recognized as the "patron saint of the monarchy."[4] Furthermore, after

Hugh Capet was buried at Saint-Denis in 996, every monarch that followed him was also

buried there, with only three exceptions: Philip I, Louis VII, and Louis XI.[5] One other

notable exception, prior to Hugh Capet, was Charlemagne, who was buried in his own

palace chapel at Aix-la-Chapelle.[6]

Dating back to Merovingian times, several of the royal crowns were housed at Saint-

Denis. In the twelfth century, Suger made a legal claim to all of the royal crowns, based on a

deposition charter by Louis VI dating to 1120. Suger also had an easier time making this

claim because of the long tradition of monarchial burials, which was justification for the

recognition of Saint-Denis as the royal patron. By the end of the twelfth century, this claim

was "extended to include the coronation regalia which from then on was kept at Saint-

Denis, in readiness for temporary removal to Rheims for each coronation ceremony."[7]

However, the church and the state were connected in many more ways.

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[3] Crosby, *op. cit*, 9.
[4] Sumner Crosby, et al. *The Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis in the Time of Abbot Suger*, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981), 13.
[5] Crosby, et al, *op. cit.*, 15.
[6] Crosby, *op. cit.*, 280.
[7] Crosby, et al, *op. cit.*, 103.

Saint-Denis was the beneficiary of "a number of early royal gifts and the granting of special royal privileges," specifically gifts of lands, which bolstered its power and prestige.[8] The Merovingians began to keep royal documents at Saint-Denis, which formed the base of records for the early histories of France, and it could be because of these archives that Saint-Denis became a renowned center of education. Several monarchs, including Pepin the Short and Louis VI, studied there; Charles the Bald lived under its protection for some time.[9] In 653 Saint-Denis received independence from the bishop of Paris, and royal immunity between the years of 657 and 664, although it did not get the distinction of 'royal abbey' until the ninth century.[10]

These special privileges freed the monks from most feudal obligations. The same privileged position, however, required close relationships between the abbey and the monarchal court. From 867 until 968 either the king or a powerful noble assumed direction of the abbey as lay abbot. For a while, the abbey had little control over its own revenues, particularly during the Norman invasions when military needs were pressing.[11] In fact, when Charles the Bald took the title of abbot in 867, he put the supervision of the abbey's resources directly in the control of the king and his officers. This was a custom that was used to bring several other monasteries under the monarch's control – Saint-Denis was not the only royal abbey in the ninth century.[12] Finally, Saint-Denis housed the relics of its martyr, Denis,[13] as well as the Oriflamme, the banner that the king carried into battle. Crosby notes that the term 'Oriflamme' was a common name; it was traditionally called the

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[8] Crosby, *op. cit*, 9.
[9] *Ibid*, 9.
[10] *Ibid*, 9.
[11] *Ibid*, 10.
[12] *Ibid*, 94.
[13] Marilyn Stokstad, *Medieval Art*, 2nd ed., Colorado: Westview Press, 2004, 231.

"vexillum of Saint-Denis" because King Louis VI, recognizing Saint-Denis's importance in the protection of the monarchy, originally took it from the high altar there during the threatened invasion of France by Henry I of England and Henry V of Germany in 1124.[14]

During the Carolingian dynasty, the monarchy and the abbey grew even closer than they had been in previous years. From the beginning of the seventh century, Saint-Denis had enjoyed the favor of the ruling king; under the Merovingians the abbey became rich through royal patronage. During the second half of the eighth century, there developed a political relationship that led to the practice of monarchs taking on the title of lay abbot. But during the Carolingian period abbots became advisors and ambassadors to the king, officially making Saint-Denis a royal abbey.[15]

The prestige and revenue of Saint-Denis grew under the control of notable abbots such as Fulrad and Hilduin, as well as under the monarchial lay abbots.  By the end of the ninth century, however, the Carolingian empire was disappearing and the threat of Norman invaders rising. Over the next two centuries the monks were "preoccupied with attempts to reestablish the important position and resources of the abbey. Not until the twelfth century did Saint-Denis once again participate in national affairs and take the lead in defining new modes of artistic expression."[16]

One of the ways that the monks tried to regain their lost privileges and control over their domains was by forging documents that reinterpreted history, extending early grants and changing wording, although these methods were probably fairly ineffective at first.[17] Hugh Capet relinquished the title of lay abbot in the late tenth century, allowing the monks

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[14] Crosby, *op. cit.*, 11.
[15] *Ibid*, 51.
[16] *Ibid*, 96.
[17] *Ibid*, 96.

to choose their own abbot. Between 1005 and 1008, the abbot of Cluny, Odilon, was the abbot of Saint-Denis abbot as well. He appears to have retained some control over Saint-Denis after this, although there were other abbots in power, up until his death in 1049. Odilon instituted several reforms at Saint-Denis, the most important being the establishment of complete monastic rule for the first time. He also followed the Benedictine custom, as at Cluny, of abolishing the division between regular and secular clergy rule. Despite Odilon's influence, there is no evidence that Cluny attempted to bring Saint-Denis under its rule.[18] Saint-Denis also had a long tradition of independence that it guarded very closely which may be why Cluny did not attempt such a move.[19]

Following the death of Hugh Capet in 966, there was a series of weak and ineffective kings. The first monarch to revive the royal authority was Louis VI, who consolidated the royal domains by bringing rebellious vassals back under his control.[20] Louis VI had been educated at Saint-Denis at the same time as Suger, where they became lifelong friends.[21] This friendship, however, was only the beginning of Suger's "early introduction into the royal court."[22] At the age of 25, he represented Abbot Adam (the abbot of Saint-Denis at the time) at the Council of Poitiers in 1106; he also accompanied Adam to many important meetings, attended councils, and went on special missions for both the abbey and the king.[23] Suger rose quickly through the ranks and was elected abbot in 1122.[24] Louis VI eventually named his son Louis VII as his successor and arranged his marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine, a brilliant political move that established the power of the king over most of

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[18] Cluny, at one point, had a great number of smaller abbeys and bishoprics within its control.
[19] *Ibid*, 96-7.
[20] *Ibid*, 107.
[21] *Ibid*, 16.
[22] *Ibid*, 117.
[23] *Ibid*, 112.
[24] *Ibid*, 109.

France. Suger maintained an alliance as much with the son as he had with the father, and when Louis VII went on the Second Crusade, Suger was named co-regent with Count Guillaume II of Nevers, during which time Suger "maintained order and prosperity in France."[25]

Saint-Denis, as the beneficiary of power and privilege from the monarchy, was also given responsibilities as part and parcel of these advantages. Throughout history, the abbey sought to maintain a balance between monarchy and monasticism, although this balance was upset in the years following the decline of the Carolingian dynasty as circumstances fluctuated within the realm of western medieval monasticism. For many years before this period, however, Saint-Denis was exemplary of the thematic concept of *regnum et sacerdotium*, a connection between church and state, "because only priests and kings of France in the Middle Ages were consecrated through the unction of Holy Oil, they were 'linked together to rule the people of God.'"[26] This bond, though severed for a time, would rise again in the time of Suger.

**The Monastic Economy and the Crisis of Western Monasticism**

In the sixth century, St. Benedict wrote his Rule, a code for all monks to follow, which included the principles of *opus Dei,* communal worship of God, *lectio devina,* divine readings, and *opus manuum*, manual labor. In chapter 66 of the *regula sancti benedicti*. St. Benedict wrote, "The monastery should, if possible, be so arranged that all necessary things, such as water, mill, garden, and various crafts may be within the enclosure, so that the monks may not be compelled to wander outside it, for that is not expedient for their

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[25] *Ibid*, 107.
[26] Paula Gerson, *The West Façade of St.-Denis*, Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1970, 146.

souls."[27]  Benedict is describing the cloister, an open-air, U-shaped square structure that is

surrounded by galleried porches and usually attached to the southern side of the

monastery. It would contain such rooms as the dormitory, the refectory, the privy and

bathhouse, the kitchen, and the bake and brew house. The cloister can be traced back to a

number of early prototypes including the Greek peristyle, the Roman atrium, the galleries

of some early Christian churches, and even some courts of Syrian churches.[28]  Walter Horn

notes that originally the walls that surrounded monasteries were symbols "of monastic

self-determination, shelter – a barrier against contamination by the impure and noisy

world outside – and an aid in establishing a corporate morale and in supervising monastic

chastity."[29]

The monastery that emerged in the context of feudalism was more self-sufficient

than it had been in previous years (actually beginning to resemble a manorial estate), and

thus, it kept more with St. Benedict's instruction of the monastic arrangement of enclosure.

Because of this, the contemporary cloister was developed to separate the monks from the

serfs and other workers – it was the establishment of "a monastery within the

monastery."[30]  While Benedict encouraged the economic self-sufficiency of the monastery,

and "emphasized the therapeutic and ascetic value of work," manual labor was also

considered a lowly activity. Eventually, physical labor began to be replaced with liturgical

labor (*opus Dei* rather than *opus manuum*).[31]  Thus, there were three major options that the

monasteries had to handle manual work: they could delegate all work to a few monks, each

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[27] Walter Horn, "On the Origins of the Medieval Cloister," *Gesta*, Vol. 12, No. ½, 1973, 19.
[28] *Ibid*, 13.
[29] *Ibid*, 16.
[30] *Ibid*, 40.
[31] Ilana Silber, "Monasticism and the 'Protestant Ethic': Asceticism, Rationality and Wealth in the Medieval West," *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 44, No. 1, March 1993, 40.

monk could have a specific duty, or, if financially possible, the monastery could employ lay personnel. The Cistercians, though, had a fourth option: they used a system of 'laybrothers', monks that were illiterate and followed a more simplistic monastic regime in addition to doing all physical and economic work, allowing the higher monks to fully devote themselves to spiritual work.[32] There are some who even argue that monastic economic success may have come *because* of the denigration of manual work – the monks had more time for study and prayer, and it also led to the development of mechanical sources of power and labor to save time and work.[33]

The cloister, in fact, can operate as a synecdoche for the monastery as a whole. The monastery was largely self-sufficient as well as an institution that was economically and administratively one unit; "to a chaotic society, the monastery was a microcosm of order."[34] The core of this idea goes back to early histories of the medieval period. In most of Western Europe, for long periods of time, the monastery was the dominant form of ecclesiastical organization.[35] There was a basic division of labor in medieval society: work (peasants), war (knights and soldiers), and prayer (monks), a structure that tended to be rather stable.[36] Beyond this structural basis, there was an equilibrium evident in the relationship between the Church and the rest of the world. This equilibrium "was founded upon the cooperation and even more upon the interpenetration and identification of the Church and the world"[37] to the degree that they were essentially the same thing. There was an

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[32] *Ibid*, 110.
[33] *Ibid*, 110.
[34] J. A. Raftis, "Western Monasticism and Economic Organization," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 3, No. 4, July 1961, 459.
[35] *Ibid*, 452.
[36] *Ibid*, 453.
[37] Norman Cantor, "The Crisis of Western Monasticism, 1050-1130," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 66, No. 1, October 1960, 56.

exchange of services between the monarchy and the Church; the monarchy received control over the churches and monasteries in their area, as well as aid and support – revenues, knights, administrative personnel, and "the fostering of popular veneration for the pious ruler."[38]  In exchange, the Church was given monarchial protection against the lay nobility, enormous estates for monasteries and bishoprics, churches and cathedrals, the raising of higher clergy to the rank of nobility, attendance in courts and councils, and some influence over policy.  Norman Cantor describes the basis of this system as "the absorption of the secular into the spiritual realm."[39]

The monastery had exceptional legal and social status in society. They received numerous tax exemptions and trading privileges, and a large amount of their wealth was from non-monastic donations.  Donations were often in the form of land from those suffering from "soteriological anxiety" who hoped the gift of land to the monastery would bring salvation.[40]  Furthermore, there existed a "legal and corporate continuity of the monastic institution" which enabled "the progressive accumulation of wealth across generations" and allowed for long-term planning. They also had a high level of financial credit and thus a greater ability to engage in long-term or more risky economic ventures because of "institutional self-confidence and legitimacy."[41]  Finally, through the "cultivation and quasi-monopoly of literacy" the monasteries were able to keep records of property and transactions – they even had the ability to forge documents.[42]  Further interdependence between church and state existed in an overarching concept of monarchial legitimacy: "The

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[38] *Ibid*, 56.
[39] *Ibid*, 57.
[40] Silbur, *op. cit*, 112.
[41] *Ibid*, 112.
[42] *Ibid*, 111.

bureaucratic and political uses of monasticism are especially salient in the context of caesaropapism, where monks played an essential role in supporting the regime's legitimacy and domesticating its subjects."[43] This interconnection and close relationship based on exchange of goods, services, privileges, and legitimacy between church and state solidified the economic strength of the monastery and the centralized power of the monarchy.

The economic organization of the monastery that was so successful bears strong resemblance to the late-modern capitalist model of business corporations.[44] Abbeys were highly regulated, and total obedience to the abbot was expected. The monks, however, were not paid, and only provided with minimal food and clothing.[45] Economic organization was "consumption-oriented." Besides food and clothing, there also existed a "ceremonial consumption: the maintenance of a liturgical style worthy of the worship of God and…expensive architectural projects, such as the building of monastic churches and residential structures.[46] This culture of consumption left little room for the generation of new sources of revenue, and a few monasteries ran into economic trouble. Monasteries were also supposed to give some portion of their wealth to charity, although amounts varied and sometimes it was merely symbolical. Thus, the two fundamental concepts that the monastic economy was founded on were "consumption and gift-giving/receiving."[47]

By and large, western monasticism was highly successful economically, and part of this success was due to the anticipation of some features of modern capitalism including rationality, technology, bookkeeping, organization of labor, and the operation of extensive

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[43] *Ibid*, 107.
[44] *Ibid*, 111.
[45] *Ibid*, 111.
[46] *Ibid*, 113.
[47] *Ibid*, 113.

markets.[48]  Monasteries held an enormous proportion of all cultivated lands; they led the

way in the application and use of new technologies such as the watermill, the mechanized

clock, intensive methods of cultivation, and often operated as a banking institution and

insurance company. They also encouraged operation of local fairs and "translocal trade,"

furthered urban development, and supported the arts related to practical and ceremonial

monastic needs.[49]  Monasteries were educational centers, mainly because of the monks'

literacy, although Saint-Denis was a particularly legendary center by virtue of its historical

archives. Max Weber, in *Economy and Society*, makes the intriguing point that monks are

"politically, the least dangerous teachers…if the political ruler wants to create an apparatus

of officials and a counterweight against the nobility…he cannot wish for a more reliable

support than the influence of the monks on the masses."[50] This political tool is yet another

piece in a long chain of evidence that ties the monastery to the monarchy, furthering the

interpenetration and interdependence of church and state.

Benedictine monasteries, such as Saint-Denis, took eagerly to the developing market

and monetary economies that emerged with capitalist growth.[51]  A crucial idea in the

monastic economy was the distinction between individual and collective wealth.

Maintaining that difference allowed for the accumulation of monastic wealth while still

"preserving the ideal of individual poverty."[52]  It is in this respect that the monastery bears

similarities to capitalist business corporations. The abbey insisted on the wealth of the

collective rather than the "individual entrepreneurship" of searching "for the material signs

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[48] *Ibid*, 109.
[49] *Ibid*, 110.
[50] Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, 1171.
[51] Silbur, *op. cit*, 114.
[52] *Ibid*, 116.

of one's salvation," although this did not mean that some individual motivations within the monastery were not taken into account.[53]  This "monastic depersonification of wealth" was also in accordance with the ecclesiastical stance that legitimized prosperity only if it was used for Christian purposes.[54]

The use of "Christian purposes," however, was not always the case, and ultimately, "monastic capitalism failed to produce its own sources of legitimacy."[55]  It could not justify unprecedented levels of economic growth and accumulation of wealth within the apparatus of capitalism. Furthermore, it became apparent that there was a cycle between wealth and asceticism: when there was a surplus of wealth, it bred "laxity and corruption" that, in turn, spurred a return to ascetic ideals. Unfortunately, the Church always had an uneasy relationship which this asceticism because a reestablishment of austere Christian poverty threatened ecclesiastic wealth and "the social order at large."[56]

The access to special privileges was not the only apparatus that tied the monastery to politics. Because of their economic successes, too, monasteries often became "implicated in political responsibilities."[57]  Under feudal law monasteries were given legal jurisdiction, land, and men.  Monasteries were highly subject to the feudal kings in particular.[58] These privileges brought several political responsibilities such as contributing money and resources to war efforts.[59] Moreover, this was one of the incentives for monasteries to generate a surplus – preserving their independence.[60]

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[53] *Ibid*, 111.
[54] *Ibid*, 117.
[55] *Ibid*, 117.
[56] *Ibid*, 117.
[57] Raftis, *op. cit.*, 455.
[58] *Ibid*, 460.
[59] *Ibid*, 456.
[60] *Ibid*, 457.

In the eleventh century, Cluny began "an era of lavish liturgical expenditure" in the service of God. This was possible because of increased revenue from priories in foreign lands that paid rent to Cluny for the use of their property (although it should be noted that Cluny also continued their service to the poor). The expenditure constituted a revival in which monasteries could receive revenue and maintain their high place in society without the political involvement that existed before under feudal law.[61] Abbots began to establish fairs and markets; a new relationship was developing between monasteries and merchants because of the freedom of monastic trade and the emerging market economy.[62] The opportunities that the new economy brought about opened a tremendous number of doors for abbeys; however, it was also the beginning of the end for monasticism at large.

In previous years, because of their literacy, monks held several different prestigious positions in society, including advisors and councilors to monarchs, or royal chancellors or chaplains. Abbots were often given the power of courts and local administration on behalf of the monarch, and sometimes even were responsible for the writing of government documents because of their calligraphic abilities.[63] However, by 1130, "it was clear that the Benedictine monasteries were losing their preeminent positions both in the religious and in the secular life of Western Europe."[64] In the second half of the eleventh century, in Italy, France, and Germany, there arose monastic factions that believed the Clunaic model was not ascetic enough. Coupled with the loss of monastic entitlement, there was also a dilemma in the Church during the mid-eleventh century. The Church was so interconnected with the rest of the world that their pious distinction and identity started to fade: "For as

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[61] *Ibid*, 462.
[62] *Ibid*, 463.
[63] Cantor, *op. cit.*, 49.
[64] *Ibid*, 50.

lay piety steadily increased throughout Western Europe, the special qualities of the clergy stood out less clearly."[65]  This was also a problem for the Church's "traditional hierocratic doctrine," and it was only because of that hierarchy that justification was made for "sacerdotal powers."[66]  As doubt of this justification grew, so did the fear that the clergy would lose their prestigious position in society.  It seemed that only a more intensive morality and fierce religious fervor among the clergy could set them apart from the lay population and thus rationalize the continuation of their exclusive powers and the respect that the monks commanded.[67]  The growing movement towards conservatism and zealousness culminated in the foundation of a new monastic order – the Cistercians – during the early twelfth century, which criticized Cluny's wealth, comforts, and artistic beauty.[68]  The Cistercians practiced strict poverty and a "return to the spiritual ideal of the apostolic church."[69]  They believed that the "wealth and power of the great Benedictine communities were a source of temptation to their members, leading them away from complete realization of the monastic ideal."[70]  The Benedictines responded quickly and forcefully to the accusations of the Cistercians, saying that the new reformist movement was guilty of the sin of pride, that there was hypocrisy "in their ostentatious self-righteousness."[71]

Thus, a sharp division had begun to appear in the monastic order of Western Europe, while, simultaneously, the dominant role of monks began to lose their dominant role in secular society. As a result of economic, political, and demographic changes, a small

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[65] *Ibid*, 61.
[66] *Ibid*, 62.
[67] *Ibid*, 62.
[68] *Ibid*, 52.
[69] *Ibid*, 63.
[70] *Ibid*, 62.
[71] *Ibid*, 52.

intellectual elite developed, along with the emergence of the beginnings of the university.[72]

But the control of higher education was not the only thing that monasteries lost.

Professional bureaucrats replaced monks in their positions as royal ministers, and because

the monarchy found new sources of military recruitment, including mercenaries, the

monarch's dependence on the military resources of the monastery declined.  The cathedral

clergy was gaining rapid influence with expanded roles in education and government. This

particular group was one of the harshest critics of monasticism; they were jealous of

monastic privileges and possessions and had a great deal of contempt for the monks.[73]

  The crisis of monasticism between the Cistercians and the Benedictines took place

within a larger crisis of Western civilization during the eleventh century, termed either the

Investiture Controversy, or the Gregorian Reform (so named for its leader, Pope Gregory

VII). The Gregorians believed in establishing a "homogeneous new world order in the form

of papal dominance" over both church and state; they wanted to completely free the Church

from state control and eradicate the doctrine of caesaropapism.[74]  Even though they

ultimately did not achieve these goals, they did succeed in breaking down the medieval

equilibrium between the Church and the rest of the world, specifically the monarchy.[75]

Thus, unlike the Cistercians, who rebelled directly against the Clunaic order, the Gregorians

revolted against something much larger, although it was also against "many things that

eleventh-century Cluny and its allies represented."[76]  The Gregorians took the same ideas

that the Cistercians espoused – asceticism, austerity, poverty, and purity – and attempted

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[72] *Ibid*, 52.
[73] *Ibid*, 54.
[74] *Ibid*, 55.
[75] *Ibid*, 56.
[76] *Ibid*, 61.

to apply them to the world at large, a doctrine of a unified Christian world system, known as *Christianitas*. The theory behind *Christianitas* can be partly explained by the medieval equilibrium: if the church and the world are synonymous with each other, "then how could asceticism and reform stop within the limits of the Church?"[77]

One of the reasons that the Gregorians failed is because they were "naïve and provincial." They largely came from areas such as Lorraine and Northern Italy where the monarchs were weak and disorganized. Gregorian monks did not understand the relationship between the monasteries and monarchs, the respect that monks had for kings like Henry III or William the Conqueror, in Anglo-Norman England and the German Empire. The failure of the reform movement, if nothing else, demonstrated that asceticism could not foist its principles upon the rest of civilization; that one cannot turn the entire world into "a monastery with a universal abbot demanding obedience from all rulers."[78] However, in response to the Gregorian Reform, the Cistercians and even some of the Benedictine monasteries like Cluny withdrew from the world, culminating in the materialization of a new equilibrium – the separation of the Church and the secular world.[79]

There is evidence of this new equilibrium as early as the 1090's, but it really came to fruition in the 1130's. Even the secular clergy had taken up a new asceticism and begun to withdraw, and the evolving secular state was not disappointed in the partial severance of ties with the monastic order and the church at large. The advent of a market-based economy went hand-in-hand with a new secular spirit. This could be seen most prominently in the courts of the monarch, where "by divesting kingship of its quasi-

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[77] *Ibid*, 64.
[78] *Ibid*, 65.
[79] *Ibid*, 65.

sacramental basis, the Gregorian Reform encouraged monarchy's greater reliance on purely secular power through the building up of administrative bureaucracy."[80]  In this respect, it is possible that the Gregorians achieved one of their goals – abolishing the doctrine of caesaropapism, or, at the very least, lessening it. Nonetheless, it seems highly significant that a role once so closely identified with the monastery was now being handed to secular bureaucrats, and is a testament to the "new, grasping, penetrating secularist spirit [that] came to dominate European political life."[81]

Cantor acknowledges the "comparative backwardness of the Capetian monarchy," evident in Suger's expanded role in France during the 1130's and 1140's.[82]  Despite this anomaly, the Benedictine Saint-Denis had a similar discordant relationship with the Cistercians as the other Benedictine monasteries did. Of particular note is the relationship between Abbot Bernard of Clairvaux and Suger, considered to be the first and the second most influential ecclesiastical figures in France, respectively, during their time.[83]  Abbots around roughly the same period, Bernard and Suger were tremendously different figures. Bernard was of noble birth, Suger of humble origins. Bernard left the world of privilege to "espouse ascetic self-denial in a Cistercian cloister" while Suger "embraced the church as a way to salvation and, suspicious of extremes, approached the conduct of human affairs with prudence and moderation."[84]  By the same token, he was a man of contemplation; while he supported the king in military endeavors against invasions, he "sought conversion by reason rather than by the sword and reconciliation by mediation rather than violence."[85]

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[80] *Ibid*, 66.
[81] *Ibid*, 67.
[82] *Ibid*, 67.
[83] Conrad Rudolph, *Artistic Change at St.-Denis*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990, 3.
[84] Crosby, *op. cit.*, 109.
[85] *Ibid*, 110.

In 1127, Bernard wrote a letter to Suger congratulating him on a series of reforms that he conducted at Saint-Denis, but severely criticizing the conditions that had existed before. He wrote, "that the community gave more easily to Caesar what was Caesar's due than to God and described the cloister as filled with soldiers and businessmen, the halls as resounding with quarrels and even worse, for women were not strictly denied access. Bernard wondered how the monks in that 'synagogue of Satan,' that 'forge of Vulcan,' could have thought godly thoughts." Bernard did admit that that he had not seen this with his own eyes, that it was all based on hearsay. He must have seen Suger in person at some point though, because he also commented on the state of Suger's clothes, saying that they "appeared a bit too excessive."[86] Suger's reforms of Saint-Denis, as well as of his own conduct, that Bernard mentions in his letter were not really reforms at all. Suger wanted his changes to *appear* to be reforms, partly to mollify Bernard and the other Cistercian critics, and partly to give Saint-Denis the illusion of contemporaneity. Reform at that time, as exemplified by Clairvaux and the other Cistercian abbeys was considered "cutting-edge" monasticism, and moreover, "contemporaneity was an important element of public respect and of self-respect for a monastery."[87] Bernard also had a stake in congratulating Suger – he was able to publicly demonstrate his influence by forcing a highly visible abbot of a traditional monastery to conduct a degree of reform, even though, in reality, it was "a reform that seems to have involved no substantive changes."[88] It should also be noted that in the midst of the Clunaic-Cistercian controversy there were factions within Benedictine monasticism pushing for ascetic artistic reform; Suger was forced to justify – on every

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[86] *Ibid*, 109.
[87] Rudolph, *op. cit.*, 11.
[88] *Ibid*, 69.

monastic front – his new artistic program at Saint-Denis on an intellectual and spiritual level.[89]

Suger's reconstruction of Saint-Denis came during unique period in history, a crossroads in time. It was a collision of tremendous events, from the reform movements of the Cistercians and the Gregorians to the declining role of the monastery and feudalism, from the development of a bureaucratic secularism to the evolution of a market economy. And it is possible that only at this particular time, in this particular place, in the midst of so much chaos, could something as extraordinarily innovative as the artistic program at Saint-Denis arise.

**Suger's Iconographic Program and Its Justification**

Bernard of Clairvaux, as the principle representative of the Cistercian order,[90] was one of the chief monks who raged against the "excesses of Clunaic art." It was he who ordered that Cistercian buildings be devoid of art. In contrast, Suger believed that the church should be a "heavenly Jerusalem built in this world"; a metaphor for the Holy City, and, in this manner, should be adorned with beautiful and precious materials "to the honor and glory of God."[91]  The idea of beauty in order to help one rise up into salvation is a dominant concept in Suger's art and architecture.

Suger was committed to two major beliefs: a stable central authority consisting of a strong monarch and a respected papacy, and the glorification of the church to both outshine and serve as an example to others. Suger also had tremendous administrative and

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[89] *Ibid*, 19.
[90] *Ibid*, 8.
[91] Crosby, *op. cit.*, 110.

financial skills, with a strict attention to detail, enabling him to reorganize and greatly increase the abbey's revenues.[92] He improved rundown properties, persistently tried to recover rights that had been lost, developed unused land, and instituted several fairs.[93] The reconstruction began in the 1130's at the west end of the church. There was a legend that the older church built by Dagobert, on the eve of its consecration, was consecrated by Christ and a crowd of angels. For this reason, the entire building, down to every last brick, received the kind of veneration given to a relic, so Suger was forced to build his church piecemeal – first the western narthex, and then the choir, with the original structure left standing in between.[94] This was, however, only a legend; it ignored the fact that the parts built by Dagobert were completely replaced in later years by Abbot Fulrad, whose church was dedicated in 775 before Charlemagne and his court. Yet popular opinion embraced the legend so enthusiastically that it was held as truth.[95] Suger was allowed to tear down the western end for his new façade because that particular part was said to be an addition made by Charlemagne, not Dagobert.[96] Also, if people saw the magnificence of the new structure in the west, Suger thought, they would be more inclined to support the rebuilding of choir.[97] There is archaeological evidence that Suger actually did begin the transept and nave, following the consecration of the choir, but he died in 1151 before it could be finished.[98]

The western end of the structure, completed in 1140, and the eastern end, completed in 1144, are extraordinarily different from each other. "The westwerk was the

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[92] Crosby, et al, *op. cit.*, 15.
[93] Crosby, *op. cit.*, 113.
[94] Crosby, et al, *op. cit.*, 17.
[95] Crosby, *op. cit.*, 280.
[96] *Ibid*, 281.
[97] *Ibid*, 123.
[98] *Ibid*, 267.

symbol of secular authority as distinct from the authority of the clergy, who presided over the church at the eastern end…the distinction between the material world of our physical, terrestrial and cognitive experiences, and the immaterial universe of celestial hierarchies."[99]  There are also very distinctive differences in design both architecturally and stylistically – between the western narthex and the eastern choir, suggesting the work of two different masters.[100]  One of the unusual aspects of Saint-Denis is the crenellations on the western end. These were rebuilt under Suger, although he mentions that they were a part of the original design. More importantly, however, is that the crenellations, or battlements, were not there for a specifically military purpose, but instead were indications that "the patron saint was protector of the monarchy and that the church guarded the royal crowns and the Banner of Saint-Denis."[101]  There are three "royal" portals, which recall the Roman triumphal arch, and feature a complex iconographic program. Like the Norman St. Etienne, there are four continuous vertical buttresses, and there are triplets of windows that echo the shape of the portals. There were two western towers, although the northern one was taken down in the nineteenth century for structural reasons. Finally, there is a rose window in the center of façade, the first in existence. Saint-Denis is widely considered the first Gothic cathedral because of its unique combination of features: the two western towers, the vertical composition organized in units of three, the sculptured portals, and the rose window. Several of these features had already appeared, but not until 1140 at Saint-Denis did they appear together.[102]

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[99] Crosby, et al, *op. cit.*, 17, 21.
[100] Stephen Gardner, "Two Campaigns in Suger's Western Block at St.-Denis," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 66, No. 4, December 1984, 574.
[101] Crosby, et al, *op. cit.*, 19.
[102] Stokstad, *op. cit.*, 232.

The choir in the east, which was not started until after the consecration of the

western end, features a double ambulatory with ribbed vaults and seven radiating chapels

as well as a more skeletal wall structure. Earlier Romanesque walls were made of thick,

heavy masonry; what came to be known as Gothic architecture reduced the walls to

massive piers and buttresses and sheathed in enormous expanses of stained glass. This

style, before it was called 'Gothic,' was described as the 'Court Style' or 'Rayonnant Style'

because the monuments in which it was implemented (Saint-Denis, Sainte Chapelle, and

Notre-Dame) were all associated with the monarchy.[103] Suger described the choir as

neither earthly nor heavenly but "a material, celestial Jerusalem, an earthly abode of God,

which would encourage the mind to move from the material to the immaterial."[104] This

theme of transformation was one of the centerpieces of his justification – so much so that it

was inscribed upon his great bronze doors.

The center of the iconographic program in the western end is the Last Judgment

upon the central tympanum, a trumeau-figure of Saint-Denis (now destroyed), the Trinity

at the very top of the arch, and the Wise and Foolish Virgins upon the doorjambs. The

bridegroom is an allegorical figure for Christ and the Virgins stand for the Blessed and the

Damned, respectively; it is a parable about being prepared for the coming of Christ,[105] and

for the "open and closed doors to Salvation,[106] thus thematically linking it to the Last

Judgment above. The column statues that framed the doors were carved with kings and

queens from the Old Testament, also thought to be the royal ancestors of Christ. The use of

this imagery is considered to refer to *regnum et sacerdotium*, the secular and the spiritual

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[103] *Ibid*, 296.
[104] Crosby, et al, *op. cit.*, 21.
[105] Gerson, *op. cit.*, 114.
[106] Crosby, et al, *op. cit.*, 26.

realms in order to "reiterate the balance of authority and emphasize the position of the Christian Church in its terrestrial world."[107]  The purpose of the monastery was to provide security, encourage reflection, and offer a way to salvation; it was common to have images of the Last Judgment and other doomsday imagery on the portals and capitals of churches in order to appeal to those in search of redemption.[108]  An unusual element in this particular depiction of Christ is that he is actually *on* the cross; the explanation of this requires an understanding of the histories associated with the figure of Saint-Denis.

By the twelfth century, Saint-Denis was a composite figure. The first part is a man called Dionysius the Areopagite, named in Acts XVII, who was converted and mentored by St. Paul. It is this particular aspect of Saint-Denis that pertains to why Christ is on the cross in the Last Judgment tympanum.  Denis saw the eclipse that occurred at the moment of Christ's death and it was then that he first began to think about Christianity and light metaphysics, although these ideas were not organized until much later under the tutelage of St. Paul. Nonetheless, Denis understood that the moment of the eclipse was one of tremendous importance,[109] and thus the Last Judgment Christ is, for Saint-Denis, a unification of the beginning and the end.

The second component of Saint-Denis occurred in the third century. After the death of St. Paul, Dionysius the Areopagite was sent to Gaul to covert the people. He was so successful in this endeavor that the pagans sentenced him to death. The night before his execution, Christ appeared to him and his two companions, gave him the Eucharist, and said, "Take this, my Beloved one, for thy reward is great with me." The three were

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[107] *Ibid*, 19.
[108] Crosby, *op. cit.*, 110.
[109] Gerson, *op. cit.*, 122.

beheaded the next day while confessing their faith in the Trinity, after which Denis picked

up his head and walked two miles to his chosen burial place.[110]  The left portal tympanum

featured the capture and imprisonment of St. Denis, surrounded by the figures of the

Zodiac, while the right depicted Christ's appearance to St. Denis while he is in prison and

the doorjambs have the Labors of the Months.[111]

The final component of Saint-Denis was a late fifth century Neo-Platonic theologian

who went by the name Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite. He is considered the author of

several mystic treatises that includes a work titled *Celestial Hierarchy* that has been

attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite. The three figures were combined in the ninth

century by Abbot Hilduin of Saint-Denis in his work *Areopagitica*, "primarily to establish

the abbey's origin in apostolic times and to give it independence from the jurisdiction of the

bishop of Paris." By the twelfth century, Saint-Denis was a firmly established character.[112]

In his mystical writings, the Pseudo-Areopagite described a "process of ascent" called the

*anagogicus mos*, or "the upward-leading method." Describing the universe, God, and Christ

in metaphysical terms, he says that the universe is made by "'the One,' the super-essential

Light."  God is called the Father of Lights, and Christ is the "first radiance." The basic idea

behind this "process of ascent" is that all people can participate in the essence of God; the

earth is in relative darkness and 'light' (God and Christ) comes down from the heavens. "As

one goes upward one gets closer to the immaterial Heaven and the Lord."[113]  It is by this

means that Suger envisioned a person moving from the material to the immaterial; "that

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[110] *Ibid*, 94.
[111] *Ibid*, 3.
[112] *Ibid*, 93.
[113] *Ibid*, 60.

which starts this upward-leading movement to the non-material is the spectacle of

beautiful things, their luster, brightness, or excellence of execution."[114]

The *anagogicus mos* is reflected in Suger's inscription upon his bronze doors:

"Whoever thou art, if thou seekest to extol the glory of
these doors,
Marvel not at the gold and the expense but at the
craftsmanship of the work.
Bright is the noble work; but, being nobly bright, the work
Should brighten the minds, so that they may travel, through
the true lights,
To the True light where Christ is the true door.
In what manner it be inherent in this world the golden door
defines:
The dull mind rises to truth through that which is material
And, in seeing this light, is resurrected from its former
submersion.

After the completion of the choir, these verses were added:

Once the new rear part is joined to the part in front,
The church shines with its middle part brightened.
For bright is that which is brightly coupled with the bright.
And bright is the noble edifice which is pervaded by the
new light;
Which stands enlarged in our time,
I, who was Suger, being the leader while it was being
Accomplished.[115]

Suger begins by telling the viewer not to look at the expense, but at the craftsmanship

itself; this is the first level of removing materiality. He says that 'bright', or expensive and

precious work should 'brighten the mind,' or uplift it to the essence of God. The phrase, 'To

the True light where Christ is the true door' can perhaps be seen as the centerpiece of the

inscription. There are first multiplicities of meaning in the word 'door': Christ is both "the

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[114] *Ibid*, 61.
[115] Edwin Panofsky, ed*., Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and its Art Treasures*, 2nd ed., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946, 47-51.

true door of the church, the door to salvation,"[116] the 'golden door,' and the bronze doors of the church upon which these words are written.  The line may well be a reference to John 10:9: "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture."[117] 'To the True light where Christ is the true door' ultimately is a metaphor for salvation, and thus, to Suger, it is through the use of the beautiful that man can attain salvation, and through materiality one can be transformed to immateriality, a belief that justifies his lavish artistic program.

Suger's rationales do not appear to be a false front as his "reforms" were. There are two highly interesting orders on the part of Suger that were recorded. First, comparing the new abbey to the City of God, Suger had gems placed in the fresh foundation of the choir.[118] Second, he had the holy water that was used in the 1140 consecration of the western façade saved so that it could be mixed with the mortar of the foundations.[119]  These actions indicate that Suger's justifications for materiality were not only outward ones, but inward ones as well. He seems to have truly meant it when he writes in his *De Administratione*:

> Thus, when – out of my delight in the beauty of the house of
> God – the loveliness of the many-colored gems has called me
> away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced
> me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which
> is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred virtues: then it
> seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some
> strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in
> the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven; and
> that, by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior
> to that higher world in an anagogical matter.[120]

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[116] Gerson, *op. cit.*, 110.
[117] The New Revised Standard Version. John 10:9.
[118] Crosby, et al, *op. cit.*, 19.
[119] Crosby, *op. cit.*, 216.
[120] Panofsky, ed*., op. cit.*, 63.

As no one but God would ever see the gems or holy water, one has to believe that Suger

honestly wanted his church to be a heavenly Jerusalem that would induce a person to 'that

higher world'.

There were practical reasons, too, for the reconstruction of the abbey. The prized

relics included three from the Passion: a nail from the cross, a part of the crown of thorns,

and the arm of Saint Simeon.[121] The older church, last built under Charlemagne, was far too

small to accommodate all of the people who flooded in on special occasions – after all,

Saint-Denis was a monastery, a mausoleum, a pilgrimage church, and a martyrium, as well

as the patron saint of the monarchy. On feast days and other occasions, especially when the

Passion relics were taken out, the halls were overrun with people. At one particular time,

when the monks were showing the relics, the masses of people pressed in so forcefully that

the monks were forced to escape out the windows behind them.[122]

Suger seemed to be terrified that his work and achievements would be forgotten.

There are two known images of him in Saint-Denis that illustrate his desire to immortalize

himself, not to mention the entire body of writing that he produced, documenting the

construction of his church. The first image of him is in the choir, in the stained-glass scene

of the Annunciation, within the Infancy of Christ window.[123] The second representation of

him is in the central portal, kneeling at the right foot of Christ. On the lintel there is another

inscription: "Receive, O stern Judge, the prayers of Thy Suger; Grant that I be mercifully

numbered among Thy own sheep."[124] This line refers to chapter 25 of Matthew: "When the

Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in

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[121] Crosby, *op. cit.*, 101.
[122] *Ibid*, 121.
[123] *Ibid*, 19.
[124] Panofsky, ed*., op. cit.*, 49.

heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left."[125] It is also for this reason that the image of Suger kneeling is to the right of Christ. Thus there is an "emphasis placed on the act of judgment and its relationship to final salvation."[126]

It is through multiple layering of words and iconography that Suger justifies the beauty and expense of his edifice to the Cistercians and other reformist orders, to himself, and to God. It reflects his hard work in re-attaining the powerful position of Saint-Denis in France, and, furthermore, the complexities of the iconographic program paints a picture of a man who understood nuance and showed loyalty to country, king, and God.

The Abbey of Saint-Denis, which had fallen from favor and privilege following the decline of the Carolingian dynasty, did not rise to its former position until the reign of Louis VI—just a few years before Suger was elected abbot. The desire to regain those past privileges, the artistic and ideological dissention between the Benedictines and the Cistercians, the revolutionary character of the Gregorian Reform, and the major economic changes of the times was the crucible in which Saint-Denis under Suger was forged, and instituted a new artistic and architectural spirit that would forever change the aesthetic face of Europe.

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[125] The New International Version, Matthew 25:31-33.
[126] Gerson, *op. cit.*, 113.

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