

Art Humanities Primary Source Reading 5

Abbot Suger

ON THE ABBEY CHURCH OF SAINT-DENIS, 1140-44

The man who commissioned and personally directed the building of the first completely gothic structure was Suger, abbot of Saint-Denis, churchman, diplomat and trusted adviser to two kings of France (1081-1151). His passionate interest in every phase of the reconstruction of the old abbey church, his rare intelligence and his intuitive ability to evaluate the artistic experiments of his time made him a great patron of the arts. Fortunately, he was moved by circumstances and temperament to commit to writing the account of the reconstruction and embellishment of his church. He wrote it in his own and his fellow brethren's name, as he said, "in honor of the Abbey and to the Glory of God and the Holy Martyrs." Suger's account is an undisguised encomium on the beauty of the new lofty structure and the infinite variety of precious objects contained in his church.¹

The abbey of Saint-Denis was situated in the town of Saint-Denis just to the north of Paris. Founded by King Dagobert (629-639) in memory of Saint-Denis, traditionally considered apostle of the Gauls, the monastery had enjoyed uninterrupted royal patronage. The abbey church housed the tombs of the French kings and guarded the royal coronation insignia and the abbey school was responsible for the education of many princes of the blood. At this school, as children, the later King Louis VI and Suger formed a lifelong friendship.

When Suger was ordained abbot of Saint-Denis in 1122, the abbey had been in poor condition for years. Its immense wealth in land, privileges, treasures and buildings had been dissipated. Within a few years of Suger's administration, the abbey was reorganized and reformed, its land-holdings and finances brought back under firm control and Suger was free to give the old Carolingian church a spacious new narthex, dedicated in 1140, and a new choir, greatly enlarged, dedicated in 1144.

*So strong was Suger's preoccupation with the reconstruction of his church that he discussed it in three separate treatises written between 1140 and 1148-49. The *Scriptum consecrationi*, written between 1144 and 1146-47, is entirely dedicated to the account of the construction and consecration of the new narthex and chevet. His account of his administration, entitled by its first editor *Liber de rebus in administratione sua gesti*, written between 1144 and 1148-49, contains an account of the improvement of the abbey's economic condition and the story of the remodeling and embellishment of the interior of the church. The *Ordinatione*, Suger's collection of his newly formulated regulations for the monastery, written between 1140 and 1141, also contains a statute which deals with the construction and consecration of the narthex and the laying of the foundation for the new choir.*

I. DE ADMINISTRATIONE.

In the twenty-third year of our administration, when we sat on a certain day in the general chapter, conferring with our brethren about matters both common and private, these very beloved brethren and sons began strenuously to beseech me *in charity* that I might not allow the fruits of our so great labors to be passed over in silence; and rather to save for the memory of posterity, in pen and ink, those increments which the generous munificence of Almighty God had bestowed upon this church, in the time of our prelacy, in the acquisition of new assets as well as in the recovery of lost ones, in the multiplication of improved possessions, in the construction of buildings, and in the accumulation of gold, silver, most precious gems and very good textiles. For this one thing they promised us two in return: by such a record we would deserve the continual fervor of all succeeding brethren in their prayers for the salvation of our soul; and we would rouse, through this example, their zealous solicitude for the good care of the

church of God. We thus devoutly complied with their devoted and reasonable requests, not with any desire for empty glory nor with any claim to the reward of human praise and transitory compensation

XXIV. OF THE CHURCH'S DECORATION.

. . . The first work on this church which we began under the inspiration of God [was this]: because of the age of the old walls and their impending ruin in some places, we summoned the best painters I could find from different regions, and reverently caused these [walls] to be repaired and becomingly painted with gold and precious colors. I completed this all the more gladly because I had wished to do it, if ever I should have an opportunity, even while I was a pupil in school.

XXV. OF THE FIRST ADDITION TO THE CHURCH.

However, even while this was being completed at great expense, I found myself, under the inspiration of the Divine Will and because of that inadequacy which we often saw and felt on feast days, namely the Feast of the blessed Denis, the Fair, and very many others (for the narrowness of the place forced the women to run toward the altar upon the heads of the men as upon a pavement with much anguish and noisy confusion), encouraged by the counsel of wise men and by the prayers of many monks (lest it displease God and the Holy Martyrs) to enlarge and amplify the noble church consecrated by the Hand Divine; and I set out at once to begin this very thing. In our chapter as well as in church I implored Divine mercy that He Who is the One, *the beginning and the ending, Alpha and Omega*, might join a good end to a good beginning by a safe middle; that He might not repel from the building of the temple a *bloody man* who desired this very thing, with his whole heart, more than to obtain the treasures of Constantinople. Thus we began work at the former entrance with the doors. We tore down a certain addition asserted to have been made by Charlemagne on a very honorable occasion . . . and we set our hand to this part. As is evident we exerted ourselves incessantly with the enlargement of the body of the church as well as with the trebling of the entrance and the doors, and with the erection of high and noble towers

XXVII. OF THE CAST AND GILDED DOORS.

Bronze casters having been summoned and sculptors chosen,² we set up the main doors on which are represented the Passion of the Saviour and His Resurrection, or rather Ascension, with great cost and much expenditure for their gilding as was fitting for the noble porch. Also [we set up] others, new ones on the right side and the old ones on the left beneath the mosaic which, though contrary to modern custom,³ we ordered to be executed there and to be affixed to the tympanum of the portal. We also committed ourselves richly to elaborate the tower[s] and the upper crenelations of the front, both for the beauty of the church and, should circumstances require it, for practical purposes. Further we ordered the year of the consecration, lest it be forgotten, to be inscribed in copper-gilt letters in the following manner:

For the splendor of the church that has fostered and exalted him,
Suger has labored for the splendor of the church.
Giving thee a share of what is thine, O Martyr Denis,
He prays to thee to pray that he may obtain a share of Paradise.
The year was the One Thousand, One Hundred, and Fortieth
Year of the Word when [this structure] was consecrated.

The verses on the door, further, are these:

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 in truth through that which is material
And, in seeing this light, is resurrected from its former submersion.

And on the lintel:

Receive, O stern judge, the prayers of Thy Suger;
Grant that I be mercifully numbered among Thy own sheep.

XXXVIII. OF THE ENLARGEMENT OF THE UPPER CHOIR.

In the same year, cheered by so holy and so auspicious a work, we hurried to begin the chamber of the divine atonement in the upper choir where the continual and frequent Victim of our redemption should be sacrificed in secret without disturbance by the crowds. And, as is found in [our] treatise about the consecration of this upper structure, we were mercifully deemed worthy-God helping and prospering us and our concerns-to bring so holy, so glorious, and so famous a structure to a good end, together with our brethren and fellow servants How much the Hand Divine Which operates in such matters has protected this glorious work is also surely proven by the fact that It allowed that whole magnificent building [to be completed] in three years and three months, from the crypt below to the summits of the vaults above, elaborated with the variety of so many arches and columns, including even the consummation of the roof. Therefore the inscription of the earlier consecration also defines, with only one word eliminated, the year of completion of this one, thus:

The year was One Thousand, One Hundred, Forty and Fourth of the Word
when [this structure] was consecrated.

To these verses of the inscription we choose the following ones to be added:

Once the new rear part is jointed 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.

Eager to press on my success, since I wished nothing more under heaven than to seek the honor of my mother church which with maternal affection had suckled me as a child . . . we devoted ourselves to the completion of the work and strove to raise and to enlarge the transept wings of the church [so as to correspond] to the form of the earlier and later work that had to be joined [by them]

XXXI. OF THE GOLDEN ALTAR FRONTAL IN THE UPPER CHOIR.

Into this panel, which stands in front of his most sacred body, we have put, according to our estimate, about forty-two marks of gold; [further] a multifarious wealth of precious gems, hyacinths, rubies, sapphires, emeralds, and topazes, and also an array of different large pearls-[a wealth] as great as we had never anticipated to find. You could see how kings, princes, and many outstanding men, following our example, took the rings off the fingers of their hands and ordered, out of love for the Holy Martyrs, that the gold, stones, and precious pearls of the rings be put into that panel. Similarly archbishops and bishops deposited there the very rings of their investiture as though in a place of safety, and offered them devoutly to God and His Saints. And such a crowd of dealers in precious gems flocked in on us from diverse dominions and regions that we did not wish to buy any more than they hastened to sell, with everyone contributing donations

Since it seemed proper to place the most sacred bodies of our Patron Saints in

the upper vaults as nobly as we could, and since one of the side-tablets of their most sacred sarcophagus had been torn off on some unknown occasion, we put back fifteen marks of gold and took pains to have gilded its rear side and its superstructure throughout, both below and above, with about forty ounces. Further we caused the actual receptacles of the holy bodies to be enclosed with gilded panels of cast copper and with polished stones, fixed close to the inner stone vaults, and also with continuous gates to hold off disturbances by crowds; in such a manner, however, that reverend persons, as was fitting, might be able to see them with great devotion and a flood of tears

XXXIII .

. . . We hastened to adorn the Main Altar of the blessed Denis where there was only one beautiful and precious frontal panel from Charles the Bald, the third Emperor; for at this [altar] we had been offered to the monastic life. We had it all encased, putting up golden panels on either side and adding a fourth, even more precious one; so that the whole altar would appear golden all the way round. On either side, we installed there the two candlesticks of King Louis, son of Philip, of twenty marks of gold, lest they might be stolen on some occasion; we added hyacinths, emeralds, and sundry precious gems; and we gave orders carefully to look out for others to be added further

But the rear panel, of marvelous workmanship and lavish sumptuousness (for the barbarian artists were even more lavish than ours), we ennobled with chased relief work equally admirable for its form as for its material, so that certain people might be able to say: *The workmanship surpassed the material*

Often we contemplate, out of sheer affection for the church our mother, these different ornaments both new and old 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 manner. I used to converse with travelers from Jerusalem and, to my great delight, to learn from those to whom the treasures of Constantinople and the ornaments of Hagia Sophia had been accessible, whether the things here could claim some value in comparison with those there. When they acknowledged that these here were the more important ones, it occurred to us that those marvels of which we had heard before might have been put away, as a matter of precaution, for fear of the Franks, lest through the rash rapacity of a stupid few the partisans of the Greeks and Latins, called upon the scene, might suddenly be moved to sedition and warlike hostilities⁴ for wariness is preeminently characteristic of the Greeks. Thus it could happen that the treasures which are visible here, deposited in safety, amount to more than those which had been visible there, left [on view] under conditions unsafe on account of disorders. From very many truthful men, even from the bishop Hugues of Laon, we had heard wonderful and almost incredible reports about the superiority of Hagia Sophia's and other churches' ornaments for the celebration of Mass. If this is so-or rather because we believe it to be so, by their testimony-then such inestimable and incomparable treasures should be exposed to the judgment of the many...

XXXIV

We also changed to its present form, sympathizing with their discomfort, the choir of the brethren, which had been detrimental to health for a long time on account of the coldness of the marble and the copper and had caused great hardship to those who constantly attended service in church; and because of the increase in our community (with the help of God), we endeavored to enlarge it.

We also caused the ancient pulpit, which-admirable for the most delicate and nowadays irreplaceable sculpture of its ivory tablets-surpassed human evaluation also by the depiction of antique subjects, to be repaired after we had reassembled those tablets

which were moldering all too long in, and even under, the repository of the money chests; on the right side we restored to their places the animals of copper lest so much and admirable material perish, and had [the whole] set up so that the reading of Holy Gospels might be performed in a more elevated place. In the beginning of our abbacy we had already put out of the way a certain obstruction which cut as a dark wall through the central nave of the church, lest the beauty of the church's magnitude be obscured by such barriers

Moreover, we caused to be painted, by the exquisite hands of many masters from different regions, a splendid variety of new windows, both below and above; from that first one which begins [the series] with the *Tree of Jesse* in the chevet of the church to that which is installed above the principal door in the church's entrance

Now, because [these windows] are very valuable on account of their wonderful execution and the profuse expenditure of painted glass and sapphire glass, we appointed an official master craftsman for their protection and repair, and also a goldsmith skilled in gold and silver ornament, who would receive their allowances and what was adjudged to them in addition, viz., coins from the altar and flour from the common storehouse of the brethren, and who could never neglect their duty to look after these [works of art].

We further caused to be composed seven candlesticks of enamelled and excellently gilded [metal] work, because those which Emperor Charles had offered to the blessed Denis appeared to be ruined by age.

XXXIV A.

. . . We also offered to the blessed Denis, together with some flowers from the crown of the Empress, another most precious vessel of prase, carved into the form of a boat, which King Louis, son of Philip, had left in pawn for nearly ten years; we had purchased it with the King's permission for sixty marks of silver when it had been offered to us for inspection. It is an established fact that this vessel, admirable for the quality of the precious stone as well as for the latter's unimpaired quantity, is adorned with "verroterie cloisonnée" work by St. Eloy which is held to be most precious in the judgment of all goldsmiths

We also procured for the services at the aforesaid altar a precious chalice out of one solid sardonyx⁵ which [word] derives from "sardius" and "onyx"; in which one [stone] the sard's red hue, by varying its property, so strongly contrasts with the blackness of the onyx that one property seems to be bent on trespassing upon the other

SCRIPTUM CONSECRATIONIS II.

. . . Through a fortunate circumstance attending this singular smallness [of the existing church]-the number of the faithful growing and frequently gathering to seek the intercession of the Saints-the aforesaid basilica had come to suffer grave inconveniences. Often on feast days, completely filled, it disgorged through all its doors the excess of the crowds as they moved in opposite directions, and the outward pressure of the foremost ones not only prevented those attempting to enter from entering but also expelled those who had already entered. At times you could see, a marvel to behold, that the crowded multitude offered so much resistance to those who strove to flock in to worship and kiss the holy relics, the Nail and Crown of the Lord, that no one among the countless thousands of people because of their very density could move a foot; that no one, because of their very congestion, could [do] anything but stand like a marble statue, stay benumbed or, as a last resort, scream

Since in the front part, toward the north, at the main entrance with the main doors, the narrow hall was squeezed in on either side by twin towers neither high nor very sturdy but threatening ruin, we began, with the help of God, strenuously to work on this part, having laid very strong material foundations for a straight nave and twin towers, and most strong spiritual ones of which it is said: *For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.* Leaning upon God's inestimable counsel and irrefragable aid, we proceeded with this so great and so sumptuous work to such an extent that, while at first, expending little, we lacked much, afterwards, expending much,

we lacked nothing at all and even confessed in our abundance: *Our sufficiency is of God.* Through a gift of God a new quarry, yielding very strong stone, was discovered such as in quality and quantity had never been found in these regions. There arrived a skillful crowd of masons, stonecutters, sculptors and other workmen, so that thus and otherwise Divinity relieved us of our fears and favored us with its goodwill by comforting us and by providing us with unexpected [resources]

In carrying out such plans my first thought was for the concordance and harmony of the ancient and the new work. By reflection, by inquiry, and by investigation through different regions of remote districts, we endeavored to learn where we might obtain marble columns or columns the equivalent thereof. Since we found none, only one thing was left to us, distressed in mind and spirit: we might obtain them from Rome (for in Rome we had often seen wonderful ones in the Palace of Diocletian and other Baths) by safe ships through the Mediterranean, thence through the English Sea and the tortuous windings of the River Seine, at great expense to our friends and even requiring payment of passage money to our enemies, the near-by Saracens. For many years, for a long time, we were perplexed, thinking and making inquiries-when suddenly the generous munificence of the Almighty, condescending to our labors, revealed to the astonishment of all and through the merit of the Holy Martyrs, what one would never have thought or imagined: very fine and excellent [columns]. Therefore, the greater acts of grace, contrary to hope and human expectation, Divine mercy had deigned to bestow by [providing] a suitable place where it could not be more agreeable to us, the greater [acts of gratitude] we thought it worth our effort to offer in return for the remedy of so great an anguish. For near Pontoise, a town adjacent to the confines of our territory, there [was found] a wonderful quarry [which] from ancient times had offered a deep chasm (hollowed out, not by nature but by industry) to cutters of millstones for their livelihood. Having produced nothing remarkable thus far, it reserved, we thought, the beginning of so great a usefulness for so great and divine a building-as a first offering, as it were, to God and the Holy Martyrs. Whenever the columns were hauled from the bottom of the slope with knotted ropes, both our own people and the pious neighbors, nobles and common folk alike, would tie their arms, chests, and shoulders to the ropes and, acting as draft animals, drew the columns up; and on the declivity in the middle of the town the diverse craftsmen laid aside the tools of their trade and came out to meet them, offering their own strength against the difficulty of the road, doing homage as much as they could to God and the Holy Martyrs. There occurred a wonderful miracle worthy of telling which we, having heard it ourselves from those present, have decided to set down with pen and ink for the praise of the Almighty and His Saints.

III.

On a certain day when, with a downpour of rain, a dark opacity had covered the turbid air, those accustomed to assist in the work while the carts were coming down to the quarry went off because of the violence of the rain. The ox-drivers complained and protested that they had nothing to do and that the laborers were standing around and losing time. Clamoring, they grew so insistent that some weak and disabled persons together with a few boys-seventeen in number and, if I am not mistaken, with a priest present-hastened to the quarry, picked up one of the ropes, fastened it to a column and abandoned another shaft which was lying on the ground; for there was nobody who would undertake to haul this one. Thus, animated by pious zeal, the little flock prayed: "O Saint Denis, if it pleaseth thee, help us by dealing for thyself with this abandoned shaft, for thou canst not blame us if we are unable to do it." Then, bearing on it heavily, they dragged out what a hundred and forty or at least one hundred men had been accustomed to haul from the bottom of the chasm with difficulty-not alone by themselves, for that would have been impossible, but through the will of God and the assistance of the Saints whom they invoked; and they conveyed it to the site of the church on a cart. Thus it was made known throughout the neighborhood that this work pleased Almighty God exceedingly, since for the praise and glory of His name He had chosen to give His help to those who performed it by this and similar signs

NOTES

1. *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of Saint-Denis and Its Art Treasures*, trans. and ed. Erwin Panofsky (Princeton: Princeton University Press, copyright 1946). Passages reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press. The reader is advised to turn to this monograph for the full Latin text, the English translation and commentaries and identification of objects mentioned in the text. Minor corrections of the Latin text, which were later published by Professor Panofsky, are incorporated here; see Erwin Panofsky, "Postlogium Sugerianum," *The Art Bulletin* XXIX/2 and 4 (1947): 19-21, 287. The history of the abbey church and its successive structural changes are exhaustively treated in the monograph by Sumner McKnight Crosby, *L'Abbaye royale de Saint-Denis* (Paris: Paul Hartmann, 1953). For a more recent critical interpretation of Suger's text see Paul Frankl, *The Gothic: Literary Sources and Interpretations through Eight Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 3-24.
2. Suger's distinction between bronze *casters* and bronze *sculptors* implies a division of work between the casters, who were called in from the outside for the highly specialized job of casting, and the sculptors, who were artists who probably came from among a crew already in the employment of the monastery. It was they who made the models for the door reliefs and later chased and polished the cast door leaves; Panofsky, *Suger*, p. 159 n. 146.
3. Both Panofsky, *Suger*, pp. 161-63, and Frankl, *The Gothic*, pp. 17-18, attribute Suger's choice of a mosaic for the old northern portal of the west façade instead of relief sculpture, which would have been more in accordance with the rest of his new facade, to his love for shiny and glittering things. This interpretation seems to oversimplify the facts, for it seems highly improbable that Suger should not have "comprehended" that mosaic had become old-fashioned, as Professor Frankl implies; the wording of this passage is explicitly apologetic; Suger's remark on the subject sounds as if the mosaic had been forced upon him by others-possibly for reasons of tradition. Whatever the reason, Suger clearly wished to make sure that posterity would be aware that he knew what he was doing when he selected the old-fashioned over the new in this particular instance.
4. There is a curiously prophetic note in these words, and one may perhaps venture to think that Suger, the astute diplomat and interpreter of human emotion, was aware, as early as his own time, of the covetous desires among his countrymen and others for the accumulated treasures of the Byzantine Empire, appetites which sixty years later were to lead to the sack of Constantinople in the fourth crusade in 1204.
5. This chalice of sardonyx (agate), gold, silver gilt, gems and pearls was in the treasury of the abbey of Saint-Denis until the French Revolution. Its history during the following century and a half is filled with intrigue, mystery and, eventually, good luck, for it was rediscovered unharmed in 1923 after it had been acquired for the Widener Collection in Philadelphia in 1922. With the rest of this collection it entered the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., in 1940; Panofsky, *Suger*, p. 205, and William D. Wixom, *Treasures from Medieval France*, Exhibition Catalogue, Cleveland Museum of Art (Cleveland, Ohio: 1967), pp. 70, 353, with an excellent photograph facing p. 70.

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