



Suger (1081-1151) and the *spiritual work* at the Abbey of Saint-Denis (12th century)

Suger (1081-1151) y la *construcción espiritual* de la Abadía de Saint-Denis (siglo XII)

Suger (1081-1151) e a *construção espiritual* da Abadia de Saint-Denis (século XII)

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Abstract: This essay analyses Abbot Suger's (1081-1151) *spiritual work* at the rebuilding of the entrance and the choir of the Abbey of Saint-Denis (1130/1137-1144). We based our research on his writings *On the Consecration of the Church of Saint-Denis* and *On What Was Done under His Administration*, as well as on the theology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Furthermore, the remnant physical structure of the church was analysed to strengthen the concepts advocated by the Abbot of Saint-Denis. Our intention was to demonstrate that in supervising the rebuilding of his abbey, Suger used Art and Architecture to communicate his spiritual beliefs based on the *metaphysics of the light*: the spirits would ascend from the material world, thanks to Christian contemplation, to the immaterial world, towards the Light.

Resumen: Este ensayo analiza el *trabajo espiritual* de Abad Suger (1081-1151) en la reconstrucción de la entrada y el coro de la abadía de Saint-Denis (1130/1137-1144). Basamos nuestra investigación en sus escritos *De la Consagración de la Iglesia de Saint-Denis* y *De lo que se hizo bajo su administración*, así como sobre la teología de Pseudo Dionisio Areopagita. Además, se analizó la estructura física remanente de la iglesia para fortalecer los conceptos propugnados por el Abad de Saint-Denis. Nuestra intención era demostrar que al supervisar la reconstrucción de su abadía, Suger usó el Arte y la Arquitectura para comunicar sus creencias espirituales basadas en la *metafísica de la luz*: los espíritus podrían ascender desde el mundo material, gracias a la contemplación cristiana, al mundo inmaterial, hacia la luz.

Keywords: Suger of Saint-Denis – Abbey of Saint-Denis – Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite – Medieval Philosophy – Gothic Architecture.

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Introduction

Suger of Saint-Denis (image 1) was a Benedictine abbot in charge of one of the most important churches of his time, the Abbey of Saint-Denis.² His desire was to transform his abbey into the *spiritual centre* of France, a pilgrimage church like never seen before. Besides being religious, Suger was an influential man in politics: loyal adviser and friend of the French kings Louis VI (1081-1137)³ and Louis VII (1120-1180).⁴

He became regent of the kingdom during the Second Crusade (1147-1149)⁵, which explains his other will: to strengthen the royal power and the French kingdom.⁶ To Suger, these ambitions were aspects of the same ideal, in which he believed to be both a natural law and the Divine Will. Besides all this, he was historian of his own acts at Saint-Denis, writing two treatises on his work.⁷

² From 1122 until his death, in 1151.

³ Called *the Fat*, son of Philip I (1052-1108), he was King of the Franks from 1108 until his death.

⁴ Called *the Young*, son of Louis VI, he was King of the Franks from 1137 until his death.

⁵ Preached by Bernard of Clairvaux (c.1090-1153), it was a warlike expedition of Western Christians in response to the conquest of Edessa.

⁶ PANOFISKY, Erwin & PANOFISKY-SOERTEL, Gerda. *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and Its Art Treasures*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 2.

⁷ *Sugerii abbatis Liber de Rebus in Administratione sua gesti* and *Libellus alter de consecratione ecclesie sancti Dionysii*. Publish in LECOY DE LA MARCHE, A. *Oeuvres Complètes de Suger*. Paris: J. Renouard, 1867. Internet, <http://google.com.br/books?id=xg8OAAAAYAAJ&hl=pt-BR>; SUGER; GASPARRI, Françoise (ed.). *Écrits sur la Consécration de Saint-Denis; L'oeuvre administrative de l'abbé Suger de Saint-Denis; Histoire de Louis VII*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2008.

Image 1



Suger depicted in the *Tree of Jesse* Window at the Abbey of Saint-Denis, 12th century. This stained-glass window is in the radiating chapel at the east bay of the church. At the bottom of the window, Suger (Sugerius) with green mantle, tonsured and with goatee, offers a stained-glass window for Christ and His lineage (which do not appear in this detail). This is one of several representations of Suger present in the abbey. Photograph by the author.

I. Suger and his work

Since the beginning of his administration as abbot of Saint-Denis, Suger tried to aggrandize its church economically and politically to implement its rebuilding.⁸ The works began by the entrance, the doors, the west facade of the church⁹ and they extended to the choir, at the east end.¹⁰ Despite the abbot's willingness to completely rebuild the basilica,¹¹ the nave was not renovated, most likely due to of his death in 1151. Between 1130/1137 and 1144, Suger's theological vision was applied to the physical structure of the abbey he administered, a landmark in medieval art.

As Suger's abbey was dedicated to the patron saint of the French kingdom, Denis, the theology of Pseudo-Dionysius presented itself as a suitable theological foundation for his own church. In the Middle Ages, three distinct Dionysius (Denis) were integrated into the same person:¹² a Greek Dionysius (member of the Areopagus¹³ and converted by St. Paul in the 1st century¹⁴), Dionysius or Denis (first bishop of Paris,¹⁵ sentenced and beheaded in Montmartre and who carried his own head until finding a suitable place for his burial, 3rd century¹⁶), and Dionysius of the Neoplatonic theological treatises that identified himself as the Dionysius of Athens (but was a theorist of the late 5th and early 6th century).

Thus, for Suger and his contemporaries, St. Dionysius¹⁷ (St. Denis) was a Greek member of the Areopagus, converted by St. Paul.¹⁸ He was sent to Paris with the

⁸ PANOFKY, Erwin & PANOFKY-SOERTEL, Gerda. *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and Its Art Treasures*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 14.

⁹ The works began between 1130/1135 and 1137. The west facade was consecrated in 1140.

¹⁰ The reconstruction of the choir started even before the whole west facade was finished, in 1140. In 1144, the east end was consecrated.

¹¹ LENIAUD, Jean-Michel & PLAGNIEUX, Philippe. *La Basilique de Saint-Denis*. Paris: Éditions du Patrimoine, Centre des Monument Nationaux, 2012, p. 40.

¹² PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS; LUIBHÉID, Colm & ROEM, Paul (eds.). *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*. New York: Paulist Press, 1987, p. 22.

¹³ Judicial Council of Athens.

¹⁴ CORRIGAN, Kevin & HARRINGTON, L. Michael. "Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite." In: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2004. Internet, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/pseudo-dionysius-areopagite>.

¹⁵ WYSS, Michaël. *Atlas historique de Saint-Denis: des origines au XVIIIe siècle*. Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1996, p. 21.

¹⁶ BLUM, Pamela Z. *Early Gothic Saint-Denis: Restorations and Survivals*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, p. 5. Internet, <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft5h4nb330>.

¹⁷ *Saint Denis*, in French; *Sancti Dionysii*, in Latin.

mission of converting those people to Christianity, together with priest Rusticus and deacon Eleutherius. However, they were condemned¹⁹ and beheaded. After the completion of his sentence, Dionysus' body took his decapitated head and marched northward as he sang psalms to the Lord. At one point, the body rested, a fact that would indicate the place of its burial – exactly where the church was built, and the monastic order of Saint-Denis was founded.²⁰

This abbey housed a collection of treatises written by someone who identified himself as Dionysus, of the Areopagus, converted by St. Paul²¹ and who was, therefore, the martyr whose mortal remains were venerated in the church itself. These texts gave the saint a character of a Christian theologian²² and served to foster the importance of the kingdom's patron to the abbey and to the Catholic Church.

Corpus dionysiacum was the name given to the collection of manuscripts produced by the character that modern scholars call “Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite”. It is composed by four treatises (*The Divine Names*, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* and *The Mystical Theology*) and ten letters.²³ The cosmos built by Pseudo-Dionysius has strong Neoplatonic connotations.²⁴

All reality is hierarchical and triad. For him, the universe is divided into two halves, the angelic and the human, which together constitute the Holy Order. The harmony and the rigor of the whole and of the parts demand that each triad, each intelligence, be kept in its own place. Then to entirely and solely, in that place, perform its own

¹⁸ This fact makes him even more holy, almost apostolic since St. Paul was a disciple and was converted by Jesus Christ.

¹⁹ In this period Christianity was not the official religion of the French kingdom.

²⁰ FÉLIBIEN, Michel. “Dissertation Préliminaire”. In: *Histoire de L'Abbaye Royale de Saint-Denys en France*. Paris: Frederic Leonard, 1706, Internet, https://play.google.com/books/reader?printsec=frontcover&output=reader&id=b92MaD_LHGE_C&pg=GBS.PP7.

²¹ As described in Acts 17:34: “Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among the which was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.”

²² VON SIMSON, Otto. *A Catedral Gótica: origens da arquitetura gótica e o conceito medieval de ordem*. Lisboa: Presença, 1990, p. 93.

²³ To this day, four treatises (*De Divinis Nominibus*, *De coelesti hierarchia*, *De mystica hierarchia* e *De mystica theologia*) and ten letters of Pseudo-Dionysius have survived.

²⁴ BISOGNO, Armando. “Escoto Eriúgena e o Início da Filosofia Cristã.” In: ECO, Umberto (dir.). *Idade Média I: Bárbaros, Cristão e Muçulmanos*. Alfragide: Publicações Dom Quixote, 2011, p. 357.

function.²⁵ The theologian proposes that we should seek the Light that radiates the Mystery so that we may be divinized through the knowledge of God.²⁶ With this, there is always in the Cosmos a cyclical, continuous and vertical movement of beings towards the One, the *first principle of being*, and of the divine light towards the beings.

The writings of the Pseudo-Dionysius and the theologians who translated and interpreted them²⁷ had great importance in the construction of the aesthetic defended by Suger. To use the conceptions of the patron saint of his abbey was an ideal path, especially for him, who wished to reform the church dedicated to Denis. Something that would elevate the construction to a direct image of the divine light. Suger was not a theologian, but an active thinker who probably absorbed knowledge from several sources to form his splendid church dedicated to St. Dionysius.²⁸

Moreover, the abbot of Saint-Denis was wise and had enough knowledge of the methods to elaborate an aesthetic based not only on the writings of Dionysius, but on all those who interested him to achieve the desired end for his formal and royal conception. Every idea used by Suger provides meaning and re-signifies another of his ideas. He elaborated his aesthetic conception with many ties that, in the end, were personified at the entrance and at the choir of Saint-Denis.

During his life in the Abbey of Saint-Denis, Suger wished to adjust the church's structure²⁹, which was very small to its importance as a royal abbey, as a necropolis of kings and as a symbol of French power. The reconstruction of Saint-Denis began on the entrance of the church, on the narthex, its doors and towers (image 2) and then, to the choir, where the Holy altar would be placed. For the faithful to be fully aware of the symbolic character of the building, the abbot of Saint-Denis inscribed (in golden copper letters) instructions on how they should behave in the house of God

²⁵ PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS; LUIBHÉID, Colm & ROREM, Paul (eds.). *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*. New York: Paulist Press, 1987, p. 5.

²⁶ PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS; MARTIN, Teodoro H. & GONZÁLEZ DE CARDEDAL, Olegario (eds.). *Obras Completas del Pseudo Dionisio Areopagita*. Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1995, p. 65.

²⁷ John Scotus Eriugena (c. 815-c. 877) and Hugh of Saint Victor (c. 1096-1141).

²⁸ ZINN JR., Grover A. "Suger, Theology, and the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition." In: GERSON, Paula Lieber (ed.). *Abbot Suger and Saint-Denis*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986, p. 35-37.

²⁹ PANOFSKY, Erwin & PANOFSKY-SOERTEL, Gerda. *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and Its Art Treasures*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 40.



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on earth to achieve the desired graces. In all his work, from architecture to ornamentation, Suger uses these instructive poems, the *tituli* (*titulus*):³⁰

Whoever thou art, if thou sleekest 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.**³¹

The verses inscribed in the central door (image 3) are the most relevant in relation to the anagogical character given to the architecture. Suger requests the faithful to try to revere the glory of the abbey, not for the gold or the high costs of the construction, but for the work done itself. Then, he describes the anagogical contemplation:³² the glow, the light of the noble work would illuminate the spirits to rise them to the true light, Christ, the true door (in counterpart to the very door on which this inscription was).

Suger continues his verses and exalts that through the golden doors, through the contemplation of material things, the mind goes towards the Truth. And, upon seeing the light, this mind ascends from its former submersion, from darkness to light.

³⁰ This element is very common in Italian churches and in the old Carolingian churches of Paris. Cf. SUGER; GASPARRI, Françoise (ed.). *Écrits sur la Consécration de Saint-Denis; L'oeuvre administrative de l'abbé Suger de Saint-Denis; Histoire de Louis VII*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2008, p. 209-210.

³¹“*Portarum quisquis attollere quæris honorem, / Aurum nec sumptus, operis mirare laborem, / Nobile claret opus, sed opus quod nobile clarete / Clarificet mentes ut eant per lumina vera / Ad verum lumen, ubi Christus janua vera. / Quale sit intus in his determinat aurea porta. / Mens hebes ad verum per materialia surgit, / Et demersa prius, hac visa luce resurgit.*” SUGER, *Liber*. In: PANOFISKY, Erwin & PANOFISKY-SOERGEL, Gerda. *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and Its Art Treasures*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 46-48.

³² *Anagogico more.*

Image 2



Current view of the restored western facade of the Abbey of Saint-Denis. The north tower was dismantled in 1846 due to structural problems. Photograph by the author.

Image 3



View of the tympanum of the central portal of the Abbey of Saint-Denis and the inscriptions of the central door. Jesus (INRI) is depicted in the centre with open arms. In His right hand he bears the inscription *Venite Benedicti Patris Mei* (Come, blessed of my Father) in allusion to those received in Paradise. Suger is represented under the right foot of Christ, in a prayer position, among the resurrected. While the phrase *Discedite A Me Maledicti* (depart from me, accursed) is in Christ's left hand, about the ones sent to Hell: The Last Judgment (Mt 25: 31-46: “*All the nations will be assembled in front of him, and he will call them out, one from another, like a shepherd separates sheep from goats. He will put the sheep on his right but the goats on his left... These people will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life*”). The division is fundamental: on the right side: the sheep, the righteous in Eternal Glory with angels. The demons are on the left side, as well as the goats, the shadow, the Hell. Photograph by the author.

In the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius there is a vertical relationship between man, below, and God, above. God casts his luminous rays downward towards all beings. Therefore, to relate to Him we must turn upwards and reverse the path travelled by the divine Light. However, this communication is only successful if each being



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remains in its place on the hierarchy.³³ Only by staying in its hierarchical place, it will receive the necessary forces to rise. The light within every creature holds the promise of guiding it back to God.³⁴

The material forms are symbols that guide us, anagogically, to contemplate the celestial hierarchies.

For it is quite impossible that we humans should, in any immaterial way, rise to imitate and to contemplate the heavenly hierarchies without the aid of those material means capable of guiding us as our nature requires (...) Material lights are images of the outpouring of an immaterial gift of light (PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, 121C-121D).³⁵

Matter is at the service of the immaterial because the material world reflects, in some way, the eternal beauty of God.³⁶

The movement of ascension of a being runs through the hierarchical scale. God is the bond that holds everything in its proper place, the one who unifies and enlightens.³⁷

“Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.”³⁸ But there is something more. Inspired by the Father, each procession of Light spreads itself generously towards us, and, in its power to unify, it stirs us by lifting us up. It returns us back to the oneness and deifying simplicity of the Father who gathers us in. For as the sacred Word says, “from him and to him are all things.”³⁹ (...) As far as we can, we should behold the intelligent hierarchies of heaven and we should do so in accordance with what scripture has revealed to us **in symbolic and uplifting fashion. We must lift the immaterial and steady eyes of our minds to that**

³³ Which are like celestial hierarchies.

³⁴ SCOTT, Robert A. *The Gothic Enterprise: A Guide to Understanding the Medieval Cathedral*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011, p. 132.

³⁵ PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS; LUIBHEID, Colm & ROEM, Paul (eds.). *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*. New York: Paulist Press, 1987, p. 146.

³⁶ PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS; MARTIN, Teodoro H. & GONZÁLEZ DE CARDEDAL, Olegario (eds.). *Obras Completas del Pseudo Dionisio Areopagita*. Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1995, p. 78.

³⁷ PUIGARNAU, Alfons. “Neoplatonismo e Iconografia en la Europa Medieval.” In: *Anuario Filosófico* 33, n. 2, 2000, p. 656. Internet, https://www.academia.edu/365224/PUIGARNAU_A_Neoplatonismo_e_iconografia_en_la_Europa_medieval. *Anuario filosófico* 33 no. 2 2000 655-673.

³⁸ Jm 1:17.

³⁹ Rom 11:36.



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outpouring of Light which is so primal, indeed much more so, and which comes from that source of divinity, I mean the Father. (...) But we need to rise from this outpouring of illumination to come to the simple ray of Light itself (PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, 121A-121B).⁴⁰

Suger demonstrates a remarkable characteristic of his conception when he mentions that the rebuilding of Saint-Denis was due to the beauty of length and breadth, but also to height and depth, he intended to treat the whole extension of the work.⁴¹ A unique liturgical space. Not only the construction, sculptures and stained glass, but also the whole church. The total feeling of God.⁴²

He did not want to shape only the physical structures, but the whole environment, built or not: the relation between the physical work and the spiritual work, between the material and the immaterial, between the sensible and the eternal, between multiplicity and unity. By the contemplation of this relation, the spirits, the minds, would be elevated to the Light.

In his description of the interior of the abbey, Suger emphasizes the symbolic and Christianising role of that architecture:

The midst of the edifice, however, was suddenly raised aloft by **twelve columns representing the number of the Twelve Apostles and, secondarily, by as many columns in the side-aisles signifying the number of the [minor] Prophets, according to the Apostle who buildeth spiritually.** “*Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, says he, but fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone which joins one wall to the other; in Whom all the building – whether spiritual or material – growth unto one holy temple in the Lord.*”⁴³ **In Whom we, too, are taught to be builded together for a habitation of God through the Holy Spirit by ourselves in a spiritual way, the more loftily and fitly we strive to build in a material way.**⁴⁴

⁴⁰ PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS; LUIBHÉID, Colm & ROEM, Paul (eds.). *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*. New York: Paulist Press, 1987, p. 145-146.

⁴¹ CAMILLE, Michael. *Gothic Art: Visions and Revelations of the Medieval World*. London: Everyman Art Library, 1996, p. 40.

⁴² SUGER; GASPARRI, Françoise (ed.). *Écrits sur la Consécration de Saint-Denis; L'oeuvre administrative de l'abbé Suger de Saint-Denis; Histoire de Louis VII*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2008, p. XLIV.

⁴³ Eph 2:20

⁴⁴ “*Medium quippe duodecim columpne duodenarium Apostolorum exponentes numerum, secundario vero totidem alarum columpne Prophetarum numerum significantes, altum repente subrigebant aedificium, juxta Apostolum, spiritualiter aedificantem: Jam non estis, inquit, hospites et advena; sed estis cives sanctorum et domestici Dei,*

The architectural elements employed at the choir of Saint-Denis were not new.⁴⁵ The innovation was to combine them in the same building with the intention of creating an ample space flooded by the colourful light of the stained-glass windows. With its complex iconography, Saint-Denis' stained-glass windows carried the message of the Church and were perfect material supports for contemplation.⁴⁶

Since this complex and magnificent space was created with the purpose of containing the main altar and sheltering the holy relics of the abbey, Suger describes in detail the ornamental and liturgical pieces, not only to show the graces God gave to the Abbey of Saint-Denis, but also to reaffirm its possessions, its power and do not let them fall into forgetfulness. The ornamentation was conceived with the same formal and spiritual conceptions of all the architectural work: a microcosm of the new basilica itself, the macrocosm. They were produced with the most precious earthly materials they could find, to exalt God, Jesus and St. Dionysius.

By contemplating the objects inlaid with the noblest things from the earth, from the glass which contained sacred iconography, which reflected its marvellous light throughout the choir, Suger describes the aesthetic experience of ascending from material to immaterial, by the anagogical manner, in a celebrated passage of the writing *On What Was Done under His Administration*:

Thus, when – out of my delight in the beauty of the house of God – **the loveliness of the many coloured 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**

*superaedificati super fundamentum Apostolorum et Prophetarum, ipso summo angulari lapide Christo Ihesu, qui utrumque conjungit parietem, in quo omnis aedificatio, sive spiritualis, sive materialis, crescit in templum sanclum in Domino. In quo et nos quanto altius, quanto aptius materialiter aedificare instamus, tanto per nos ipsos spiritualiter coaedificari in habitaculum Dei in Spiritu sancto edocemur.” SUGER, Libellus. In: PANOFSKY-SOERGEL, Gerda. *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and Its Art Treasures*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 104.*

⁴⁵ Like the lancet and equilateral arches, the rib vault and the stained-glass windows. TOMAN, Rolf. *Gothic: Architecture, Sculpture, Painting*. Paris: Ullmann & Könemann, 2007, p. 32; VON SIMSON, Otto. *A Catedral Gótica: origens da arquitetura gótica e o conceito medieval de ordem*. Lisboa: Presença, 1990, p. 104.

⁴⁶ CERCLET, Dominique et al. *La Basilique Saint-Denis: Restauration de la Façade Occidentale*. Issy-les-Moulineaux: Beaux-arts Éditions, 2015, p. 102.



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Heaven; and that, by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner.⁴⁷

Through these verses the influence of the beauty, of the brilliance of the gold and of the precious stones in the abbot of Saint-Denis is evident. However, as Suger points out, the anagogical manner, with the elevation of the spirit through material things to the immaterial, is only possible thanks to the Holy Christian Virtues. Therefore, the mind will only be carried to the Light if the thoughts of contemplation are grounded in Christ, especially its Redemption and Ascension, the most frequent figurative types in the ornamentation of the abbey: Jesus' death and resurrection, marked by the harmony between the Old and New Testaments.⁴⁸

Suger finished his writing on consecration with a prayer: the culmination of his treatise. It describes the spiritual work of the abbey: the unity between the visible and the invisible, between the human and the divine through the sacraments, the passage from the *Earthly Jerusalem* to the *Heavenly Jerusalem* and the union between the faithful so that this construction became the *House of God* and the harmony of the world:

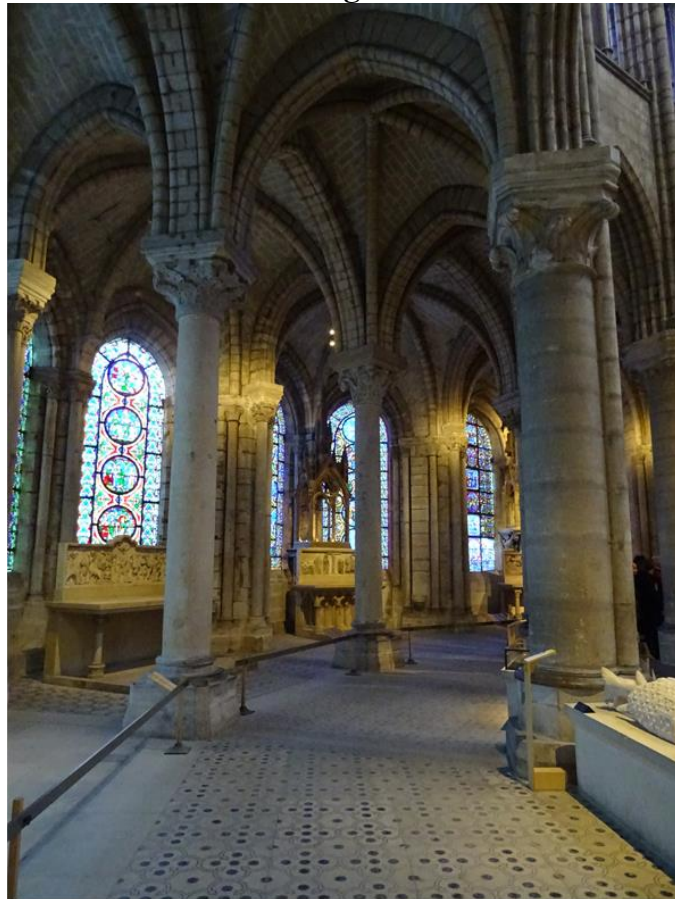
Blessed be the glory of the Lord from His place. Blessed and worthy of praise and exalted above all be Thy name, Lord Jesus Christ, Whom God Thy Father has anointed the Highest Priest with the oil of exultation above Thy fellows. By this sacramental unction with the most holy chrism and by the susception of the most holy Eucharist, **Thou uniformly conjoinest the material with the immaterial, the corporeal with the spiritual, the human with the Divine,** and sacramentally reformest the purer ones to their original condition. **By these and similar visible blessings, Thou invisibly restores and miraculously transformest the present [state] into the Heavenly Kingdom.** Thus, when Thou shalt delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father, mayest Thou powerfully and mercifully **make us and the nature of the angels,**

⁴⁷ “Unde, cum ex dilectione decoris domus Dei aliquando multicolor gemmarum speciositas ab extrinsecis me curis devocaret, sanctarum etiam diversitatem virtutum, de materialibus ad immaterialia transferendo, honesta meditatio insistere persuaderet, videor videre me quasi sub aliqua extranea orbis terrarum plaga, quæ nec tota sit in terrarum face, nec tota in cæli puritate demorari, ab hac etiam inferiori ad illam superiorem **anagogico more** Deo donante posse transferrî”. SUGER, *Liber*. In: PANOFKY-SOERGEL, Gerda. *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and Its Art Treasures*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 62-64.

⁴⁸ MÂLE, Émile. *L'art religieux du XII^e siècle en France: étude sur les origines de l'iconographie du moyen âge*. Paris: Armand Colin, 1922, p. 158-159. Internet, <https://archive.org/details/lartreligieuxdux00mluoft>.

Heaven and earth, into one State⁴⁹; Thou Who livest and reignest as God for ever and ever. Amen.⁵⁰

Image 4



Current view of the choir of Saint-Denis. In the ambulatory the path is delimited by two rows of twelve monolithic columns. The ribbed vaults crown the sacred settings of the radiating chapels and the double ambulatory. In each chapel there is an altar and two large stained-glass windows. Photograph by the author.

⁴⁹ Eph 2:19

⁵⁰ “*Benedicta gloria Domini de loco suo; benedictum et laudabile et superexaltatum nomen tuum, Domine Ihesu Christe, quem summum Pontificem unxit Deus Pater oleo exsultationis prae participibus tuis. Qui sacramentali sanctissimi Chrismatis delibatione et sacratissime Eucharistiæ susceptione materialia immaterialibus, corporalia spiritualibus, humana divinis uniformiter concopulas, sacramentaliter reformas ad suum puriores principium; his et hujusmodi benedictionibus visibilibus invisibiliter restauras, ecclesiam præsentem in regnum cæleste mirabiliter transformas, ut cum tradideris regnum Deo et Patri, nos et angelicam creaturam, cælum et terram, unam rempublicam potenter et misericorditer efficias; qui vivis et regnas Deus per omnia secula sæculorum. Amen.*” SUGER, *Libellus*. In: PANOFSKY-SOERGEL, Gerda. *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and Its Art Treasures*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 120.



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Therefore, the rebuilding of the Abbey of Saint-Denis, from the laying of foundation stones to the consecration ceremony, was a *spiritual work*. It was the reflection of the cosmic universe conceived by the abbot and based on the Holy Scriptures, in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius and of the theological conceptions of the 12th century.

Architectural details were not described by Suger, since architecture and art served as a support for spiritual exegesis consecrated to God, an accomplishment beyond purely aesthetic contemplation (Figure 4). From *materialibus ad immaterialia*.

Conclusion

In the Middle Ages, art did not have the first objective of aesthetic appreciation (the notion we have today). Artistic and structural perfection was tied to divine perfection. The churches were images (even if imperfects) of *Heavenly Jerusalem*, the *House of God* on earth. This is what we perceive in Suger's Saint-Denis: harmony, unity and proportion, between the parts and the whole, were treated as directives to the architectural project to externalize the Catholic message.

The reconstruction of Saint-Denis was unique, especially due to its relationship with the French royal power. By strengthening the French monarchy, Suger created means for his restoring and, in rebuilding the church, he emphasized the bond between the two institutions. Therefore, it is not interesting to separate the reconstruction of the Abbey of Saint-Denis from French kingdom. Thus conceived, the monument was a celebration of the glory of the King of Heaven and the French king. Abbot Suger was fundamental in articulating real and spiritual power. He strengthened both and consolidated his faith.

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