A STATUE FROM SAINT-DENIS

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“The royal, national, imperial abbey church of Saint-Denis,” writes Viollet-le-Duc, is “among those monuments that have been spared neither by time nor men and were made to suffer every ordeal that earthly things can suffer.”

The Benedictine abbey of Saint-Denis-en-France, “most famous and glorious among all those of the Kingdom of France, . . . foremost among the abbeys of all Gaul and perhaps of all Europe,” was for centuries the palladium of France. Its history was closely interwoven with that of the kingdom itself. The French kings came here to seek spiritual support and advice and to receive blessings for crusades and wars; and here they were brought to be buried. Rich gifts were showered on the abbey by kings, nobles, and common people alike.

Some time in the fifth century a church was built in honor of Saint Denis, first Bishop of Paris and patron saint of France, on the spot where, according to legend, he and his companion martyrs, Rusticus and Eleutherius, were beheaded. Later, an abbey was founded. Rebuilt and added to at various periods, it grew steadily in size and in ecclesiastical and political importance. The apogee of power and glory came to Saint-Denis with the famous Abbot Suger (1122–1151). A wise and clever man, a successful prelate and statesman, he had the courage and the ability to disagree with his contemporary Saint Bernard, who preached the simplicity and austerity of monastic life. In accordance with his convictions, Suger made his abbey comfortable and pleasant and created sumptuous settings for the greater glorification of the Christ he served. In this he was not averse to following the dazzling example of Hagia-Sophia at Constantinople.

Endless crowds came to Saint-Denis on feast days and on pilgrimages to adore the many sacred relics and to participate in spectacular celebrations and processions of all kinds. The congestion in the church often became unbearable; sometimes people were crushed to death. To accommodate these crowds and to make the abbey worthy of the position it occupied, Suger decided to enlarge the basilica. He gathered “a skillful multitude” of craftsmen from every part of the kingdom. In the rebuilding of his abbey he used many new ideas. The advanced architectural elements and his scheme of sculptural decoration for the portals were adopted in many great churches and cathedrals, determining the course of French architecture for the next century. The iconographical program chosen by Suger was an interpretation of the desire of theologians to establish a firm link of continuity between the New and Old Testaments. It illustrated the Genealogy of Christ, or the Tree of Jesse (Matthew, i. 1-17, and Isaiah, xi. 1-2), and was inspired by the liturgical drama “Ordo Prophetorum.” In this play, performed at Christmas, a procession of prophets came into the church and foretold the coming of Christ, demonstrating to the people that the New Law was the fulfillment of the Old. In one version the prophets sang: “We rejoice in celebrating the Feast Day of the famous King of Glory. We declare that his New Canons will rule over the whole earth.” Statues representing various prophets and ancestors of Christ filled the portals.

The undertaking was enormous. Suger did not finish it in his lifetime. But the “new church” was dedicated before its completion—not an unusual practice of the time—the narthex and west façade in 1140 and the chevet, or east end, in 1144. Justly proud of his achievements, he left a beautiful description of this ambitious rebuilding and of the magnificent ceremonies of consecration “to save for posterity, in pen and ink, . . . the memory of our great labors.” After the consecration of 1144 work did not stop entirely but became less intense because of shortage of funds.

Reconstruction on a large scale was started
again in the thirteenth century. At that time the architect Pierre de Montreuil changed the Romanesque cloister with twin columns to a Gothic one, shown in a late seventeenth-century engraving made for Dom Michel Germain’s Monasticon Gallicanum. He also built a new portal connecting the south end of the enlarged transept with the cloister. The last radical change to the cloister took place in the eighteenth century, when it was given its present, classicized appearance by Robert de Cotte and others.

With the Revolution came the secularization and devastation of the abbey. The treasury was emptied, tombs thrown open, and sculptures shattered. The lead roof was taken down and used for metal. Nothing but walls remained. After a while, cautious attempts were begun to salvage some of the sculpture, and requests were made for protection of the building. Then followed “restorers,” who, in their over-anxious zeal, caused further irreparable damage, rivaling the mob’s fury.

The once “venerable and honorable monastery” stands now in the rather inglorious surroundings of an industrial suburb of Paris, stripped of most of its glory. But the church is still impressive and has kept its awe-inspiring majesty and solemnity.

After all these vicissitudes, only remnants of the sculpture of Suger’s time are to be found, scattered here and there in the world. Until a short while ago not a single full-length statue was thought to have survived. It was, therefore, an event of great significance when the columnar statue of a king in the Metropolitan Museum—a great favorite of laymen and art historians ever since its acquisition in 1920—was recently discovered to be from Saint-Denis. It was identified by the author of this article as one of the “two statues of Merovingian Kings with nimbi, sculp-
tured on two columns supporting the cloister ... in the oldest part of the cloister of the Monastery of Saint-Denis,” illustrated by Dom Bernard de Montfaucon in his *Monuments de la monarchie française* (vol. 1, pl. x), published in 1729.

The preservation of the limestone statue is very good if one discounts the damaged face and missing hands, which, originally, held a scroll and, probably, a scepter. The king has a short curly beard and curly hair, parted in the middle, falling to his shoulders. He wears a crown carved to represent a metal band set with jewels; the points of the crown are almost completely chipped off but can still be seen in Montfaucon’s drawing. The nimbus behind the head has a pearled border. The king is clad in royal robes consisting of a *chainse* (tunic), usually made of fine white linen, with narrow sleeves, and, over it, a *bliaut* (super-tunic), usually made of silk, with wider sleeves and a center slit at the neck. The bliaut fits rather tightly over the upper part of the body, and its wide skirt is crumpled into fine pleats. Around the waist is a rich girdle, crossed in back, brought forward again, and tied, the two narrow ends with decorative tassels hanging below the knees. The folds of a mantle fall loosely from the shoulders and are caught over the forearms. The borders of the clothes are decorated with embroidery or passementerie in various patterns, and the shoes are either embroidered or otherwise ornamented. The whole costume reflects the renewed influence of Byzantine fashions on Western Europe in the second quarter of the twelfth century, brought back by knights returning after the First Crusade. When the polychromy, now missing, was present, the effect must have been brilliant. To judge from manuscript illuminations, the colors were probably reds and purples enhanced by the bright gold of the borders and the belt.

Doubt has been expressed in the past by some scholars concerning the accuracy of such details of the king’s costume as the center neck opening and the decorative long ends of the belt, more often associated with women’s clothing. It is well, therefore, to point out at least a few of the many examples of such details in men’s attire. The tunics of the apostles on the façade of Saint-Gilles and of the male figures on the pillars of the cloister of Saint-Trophime at Arles have similar neck openings. The decorative ends of the belt can be seen on a seated statue of King David in the Camposanto at Pisa. Earlier, such a

*LEFT:* Limestone statue of a king from the cloister of Saint-Denis, where it was probably attached to a column in the north arcade. French, middle of the XII century. *Joseph Pulitzer Fund,* 1920
belt is worn by the emperor Henry III on the dedication page of the Codex Caesareus (about 1050) from Goslar, now in Uppsala. A similar belt, presumably made for the emperor Otto III, was part of the crown treasure of the Roman Empire up to a century and a half ago, when it was lost. A center neck opening and a belt with two long ends appear together in a Cistercian manuscript in Dijon, the Moralia of Saint Gregory, dated 1111 (see p. 302).

Following the trend of his century to look for French royal portraits in all crowned statues, Montfaucon calls the statue a Merovingian king. Actually, it must be an Old Testament figure, a prophet or an ancestor of Christ, probably Solomon, the wise and just king, who is often represented with a scepter, or a “hand of justice.” Solomon and David were great favorites at this time, when wisdom and justice were considered to be the most desirable qualities for a ruler.

Montfaucon does not specify the exact location of the statue within the cloister, but he most likely saw it in the row of columns supporting the arcade of the north gallery, dating from Pierre de Montreuil’s alterations in the thirteenth century and still standing in 1729. Old columns from the Romanesque cloister are known to have been used in the rebuilding, and in the accounts of Saint-Denis references are found to the “washing and repainting of images in the cloister” in 1287 and to expenses “for repairs of ancient prophets” in 1294. Whether the statue was originally made for the north arcade is difficult to determine. It could have come from a portal, possibly the twelfth-century one leading from the church to the cloister, or from a connecting porch—there seems to have been a space between the cloister and the church wall, used as a storeroom for books. Grooves on the back of the statue may have been provided for a means of attachment like the metal bar seen in one of Montfaucon’s illustrations. Of course, the statue may have been made for the cloister itself; one can see such a columnar statue in the arcade of the late twelfth-century cloister, with twin columns, of Saint-Sauveur cathedral in Aix-en-Provence (see p. 304).

Doublet, describing Saint-Denis in 1625, does not speak of columnar statues in the cloister, nor does Félibien in 1706. But Dom Plancher, in his Histoire de Bourgogne (1739), refers to the “statues of . . . kings in the Saint-
Illuminations from manuscripts showing male figures with details of costume similar to those of the Museum's statue. **LEFT:** The dedication page of the Codex Caesareus, in Uppsala, about 1050, with the emperor Henry III at the left, wearing a belt with long, decorative ends. **RIGHT:** Decorative initial from the Moralita of Saint Gregory, in Dijon, dated 1111, showing Saint Michael (?) wearing a tunic with a center neck opening and a belt with long ends.
Denis cloister,” saying that they were “quite similar” to the kings on the portal of Saint-Benigne in Dijon, of which only one head remains, in the Dijon museum. He points out a drilled decoration on the shoes of one of the Dijon kings, found also on the shoes of the Metropolitan Museum’s king. Plancher speaks of three kings in the Saint-Denis cloister, and although Montfaucon mentions only two in his text, he illustrates a third king as well. The third king has no nimbus but wears a crown that is identical to one in a drawing made for Montfaucon of a series of crowns, labeled “a king from the cloister of Saint-Denis.” Furthermore, in handwritten notes for plate x of Montfaucon’s book we read: “two statues of kings with nimbi, . . . [a third] statue of a king without a nimbus.”

Our statue most probably remained in the cloister until the second half of the eighteenth century, when the north gallery was torn down. There is no documentary evidence for the date when it was carved, although work was taking place in the cloister in Suger’s time. Marcel Aubert, who with Sumner Crosby has been doing extensive excavating in the abbey church for a number of years, says that there are some uncertain indications of work started about 1130 or 1135 on reconstruction of claustral buildings. Paul Vitry and Gaston Brière speak of the rehabilitation of the side walls of the church as in progress from 1145 to 1147, but they say nothing of the cloister portal. Professor Crosby, in his book published in France in 1953, expresses his belief that work on Suger’s transept, near its south portal, was finished by 1148.

Judging from Montfaucon’s drawings of the west-façade statues, carved from about 1135 to 1140 and now lost, there was a certain variety in Saint-Denis sculpture. This lack of homogeneity can be easily explained by the diversity of workshops employed by Suger. One group of figures, with crossed legs and inclined heads, shows great liveliness and seems to reflect Eastern influence. Another group has figures more relaxed, more regally poised. No doubt, sources for both groups could be traced through various channels to Byzantium and the Near East. Also, Benedictine abbeys had a great wealth of manuscripts, ivories, and other objects of art from which to find inspiration. Our statue, with its hieratic restraint, has some traits and decorative motives in common with the second, quieter group. One can find a few related elements in fragmentary heads in the Louvre and the Walters Art Gallery.

In comparing the statue with sculpture outside of Saint-Denis, relationship can be found to at least three statues on the Royal Portal of Chartres cathedral (1145–1155), if allowance is made for their greater freedom of treatment and more transitional style. The heads of these figures...
all have broad faces with squarish chins, a slight indication of a smile, and wide-open eyes. In addition, the beardless King of Judah on the left side of the south doorway wears a crown like that of the Museum’s king. The delicately carved drapery of our statue is more stylized than that of the Chartres statues. On the other hand, if one can judge from Montfaucon’s drawings, the drapery arrangement on the two other kings from the Saint-Denis cloister differs less from that in Chartres. The similarity to the Chartres statues is especially interesting because it is believed that some workers went over to work at Chartres after they had finished at Saint-Denis. The portal of Saint-Benigne must have been roughly of the same period as Saint-Denis and Chartres, 1137–1147; according to Dom Plancher the statues carved on it “were quite flat . . . and . . . bore resemblance to the kings of the Saint-Denis cloister.” Indeed, the remaining head from Saint-Benigne does look contemporary.

The king on the portal at Saint-Loup-de-Naud (about 1167) and the one in the Louvre from Corbeil (after 1170), although definitely derived from Saint-Denis and Chartres, are later in style. The Saint-Loup-de-Naud king is well on its way into Gothic, and the Corbeil king, while still quite rigid, is less an integral part of the column, and details such as drapery are more naturalistic. From all these comparisons it appears that the statue in the Museum should be dated around 1150, or in the five years before.

Until now, only the findings of Professors Aubert and Crosby concerning the building activities up to the time of Suger have been described in detail, in a book by Crosby, published in 1942. A second volume, promised for the near future, will be devoted to Suger’s period and may contain additional information relevant to the Museum’s statue. Meanwhile, we are indebted to the learned Benedictines Dom Montfaucon and Dom Plancher, who have preserved for us pictorial records of some monuments that neither time nor men have spared.

View of the late XII century cloister of the cathedral of Saint-Sauveur, at Aix-en-Provence, showing a statue attached to one of the double columns

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