SUGER

Suger, who was the abbot of Saint-Denis Basilica in Paris from 1122 to 1151, is considered a founder of Gothic architecture and an important negotiator who assisted the French monarchy in strengthening its royal authority.

Suger was born to peasant parents in 1081 and given as a child oblate to the monastery of Saint-Denis when he was 10 years old. At Saint-Denis, Suger befriended crown prince Louis Capet, who was also 10 years old and was also receiving his education at the monastery. The two remained friends even after Louis was crowned King Louis VI in 1108 and after Suger became the secretary to Abbot Adam at Saint-Denis.

During Suger's lifetime, French kings did not possess much power. Most of the vassals did not feel compelled to follow the king's orders and instead pursued their own interests at the expense of the crown. Even the lands that were considered the king's personal property, or demesne, including the Île-de-France, suffered under the rule of petty nobles who refused to acknowledge the monarch's authority.

Suger, Louis' close adviser, believed that the king should be the undisputed ruler of France and the protector of the Catholic Church and the poor. He encouraged Louis to regain control of the Île-de-France and to punish insubordinate nobles who had chosen to build castles. Louis' success in consolidating control over the lands laid the foundation for further strengthening of the French monarchy. Suger celebrated that success in his biography of Louis. Suger's narrative started a tradition of Saint-Denis monks writing the biographies of French kings.

Suger was much more than a mere historian of the monarchy. He helped to organize the royal administration and maintain peace between Louis and his potential rivals. He served as the royal representative to the papal court, cementing a powerful alliance between the pope and the French Crown. In addition, he developed friendly relations with English king Henry I and acted as a mediator between Henry and Louis.

In 1124, two years after becoming the abbot of Saint-Denis, Suger was able to unite all of the nobles of France under the banner of Saint-Denis in order to protect France from the designs of the Holy Roman emperor Henry V. The French Army was so large that Henry retreated without even a fight. By identifying Louis as the vassal of Saint Denis, who fought on behalf of God and Christianity, Suger gave the king religious legitimacy and authority that other French nobles could not challenge.

Suger continued to play an important role during the administration of Louis VII. He negotiated peace between Louis and the count of Champagne when hostilities between the two led France into a civil war. From 1147 to 1149, Suger acted as regent while Louis was leading the Second Crusade. In the king's absence, Suger vastly improved the administration of France in order to fund Louis' crusade and also maintained peace among the rebellious French nobility.

Suger's most lasting achievement may have been architectural. He initiated the rebuilding of the abbey church at Saint-Denis in 1135, and in the process, he created the first Gothic cathedral. He combined separate architectural elements, including the pointed arch, the ribbed vault, and the flying buttress, that
allowed for incredibly high ceilings and stained glass walls that admitted ample light. In the subsequent centuries, Gothic architecture spread throughout northern and central France and then across Europe.

Suger built a magnificent church, and his efficient administrative skills kept the monastery out of bankruptcy. During a time when other monasteries needed to borrow money because of poor management, Suger streamlined Saint-Denis' administration and reformed the lives of its monks so that borrowing became unnecessary.

Suger recorded his accomplishments in two books: *De Administratione* (*On Administration*), which discussed the achievements of his own administration as abbot, and *De Consecratione* (*On Consecration*), which examined the consecration of the church of Saint-Denis. Suger died in January 1151 of malaria while planning a crusade.

**Nancy McLoughlin**

**Further Reading**


COPYRIGHT 2019 ABC-CLIO, LLC

This content may be used for non-commercial, classroom purposes only.

**MLA Citation**


Entry ID: 589585