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SUGER'S LIFE AND PERSONALITY

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ABSTRACT

The text which follows was presented as the introductory paper at the International Symposium on Abbot Suger and Saint-Denis held at Columbia University, 11 April 1981. It gives a brief chronology of Suger's life -- born c. 1081, became abbot 1122, died 1151. Suger, who came from a family of minor knights, tells us almost nothing of his childhood and background. He got early administrative training as a provost of priories in Normandy and Beauce and also served King Louis VI as an emissary. As Abbot of Saint-Denis he served both Louis VI and his son, Louis VII as a counsellor, and during the Second Crusade he acted as regent. His policies showed a consistent preference for negotiated settlement and peace. Suger's three major monuments were his writing, his administrative and financial reforms, and his artistic achievement in the rebuilding and embellishment of the abbey church. On all these he left marks of his own strong sense of self.

SUGER'S LIFE AND PERSONALITY

The two goals of this paper are simple: first, to present a brief outline of Suger's career as an orientation for those members of the audience who would like an aide-mémoire, and second, to make some statements about his personality and to raise a few questions which may be addressed in greater detail as the symposium develops. In preparing this paper I have assumed that the conference would quickly render it out of date, and that by Sunday evening we will all have a fresh and much more detailed view of Suger's life and works.

Suger died in 1151 and the abbey circulated an encyclical letter which contained the following chronological statement: "He died between the words of the Lord's Prayer and the Symbol, the Ides of the month of January, in his seventieth year, about sixty years after he assumed the monastic habit, in the 29th year of his prelacy." From this statement we may calculate the years of the major dates of Suger's life: born in 1081 (or possibly, quod absit, 1080), he became an oblate of Saint-Denis about 10 years later, was consecrated abbot on 12 March 1122, and died 13 January 1151. These dates are the most essential points of Suger's personal chronology to bear in mind during this conference. Let us now flesh them out a bit.

We know next to nothing about Suger's family. Almost certainly he came from the class of minor milites which demonstrated such social mobility at the courts of Philip I and Louis VI. Eric

Bournazel has suggested that he may have sprung from the Orphelin family from near Lagny (Gouvernement capétien, p. 72). If so, his family would have been neighbors of the Garlandes and from a similar social level--comparable to the families of Abelard and Guibert of Nogent, and lower than those of Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter the Venerable, lower too, on the secular side, than those of Le Puiset, Marle, Rochefort, or Montlhéry.

We know the names of Suger's father, Helinand, and of a brother and sister-in-law, Raoul and Emelina, from the obituary role of Saint-Denis. Nowhere, however, do we learn the name of his mother, nor does he ever mention her in his writing. Or perhaps, I should say, he never refers to his natural mother, for repeatedly he writes in the most physical terms of his institutional or spiritual mother, the mater ecclesie, by which he always means the abbey of Saint-Denis. Besides Raoul we learn of another brother, Pierre, who accompanied Suger to Germany in 1125, as well as of three nephews. But of Suger's early life and relations with his siblings, he himself tells us nothing.

Suger was oblated at the principal altar of Saint-Denis, an altar he later enriched with gold decorations. He then spent approximately a decade at Saint-Denis de l'Éstrée, a dependency close to the great abbey church. Then for a period before 1106 he went to school at some distance from Saint-Denis, near Fontevrault, he tells us. Marmoutier is a possible location. By this time he was 25 years old and began to go on missions for his abbey, to a synod at Poitiers in 1106, and to attend Paschal II at La Charité-sur-Loire and at

Châlons-sur-Marne in 1107 when the Pope met the Emperor Henry V. He took on settled administrative responsibilities under Abbot Adam, first as provost of Berneval on the Norman coast near Dieppe, then as provost of the more important priory of Toury between 1109 and 1111. Toury sits strategically on the road from Paris to Orléans just eight km. from Le Puiset. The priory was attacked by Hugues of Le Puiset and in 1112 by Thibaut of Blois, Milon of Montlhéry, Hugues of Crécy and Guy of Rochefort. Since Suger writes in The Life of Louis VI with considerable detail about the continuing conflict of the king with all these men, it is well to remember that they were important to him not only for their opposition to the crown but for their attacks on a domain of Saint-Denis for which Suger was responsible.

During these years as a monk of Saint-Denis, Suger served his king, Louis VI, as well as Abbot Adam; notably in 1118 Louis sent him as an emissary to meet Gelasius II in southern France, and in 1121-22 he went to Italy to see Calixtus II on behalf of Louis. It was on his return from Italy in March of 1122 that the 31-year old monk learned that Abbot Adam had died and his brothers at Saint-Denis had elected him abbot. Suger took pride in the fact that he had been absent and had not even known of the election. His fellow monks may have thought that Suger's election would please the king--the two men were approximately the same age and may well have known each other at the abbey school, though Louis probably left Saint-Denis a year or two after Suger became an oblate, and there is no evidence to show that the two men were ever friends in their youth. Before 1122 Louis had already chosen Suger for responsible positions. But the monks made

the crucial mistake of failing to consult the king about the election, perhaps as a deliberate challenge to his authority, and had to face his anger and even imprisonment when they sought his assent. Only after negotiation did the king grant Suger his peace and confirmation. On 11 March 1122 Suger was ordained a priest, and the next day installed as abbot. Within a few years Suger moved to the position of a favorite counselor. As abbot of Saint-Denis he enjoyed a triumph of influence and prestige when in 1124 the king came to the abbey to take the banner of the Vexin from the altar and to grant privileges to the church and then quickly enjoyed a bloodless victory over the invading Henry V. In his charter for the abbey, Louis referred to Suger as "venerabilis abbas, quem fidelem et familiarem in consiliis habebamus."

Within the first five years of his abbacy, Suger moved to reform the morals of his flock. If one judges the unreformed monks of Saint-Denis on the basis of the strictures of Bernard of Clairvaux or the bitter memoir of Abelard, one must consider conditions at the abbey under Abbot Adam as pestilential indeed. Whether the abbey was, as Abelard said, "absolutely worldly and vile" and whether Adam surpassed his monks in evil living and notoriety (Hist. Cal. lines 654-7), any human institution can be improved, and Suger must have made remarkable reforms to have earned the praise of his former critic Bernard.

In a famous letter (ep. 78) Bernard sent his congratulations to Suger, praising him because now "the vaults of the church reverberate with spiritual canticles rather than the affairs of the

court." He went on to denounce the king's chancellor and seneschal, Stephen of Garlande, noting that Suger was said to have been bound to him in friendship and urging him to make Stephen also a friend of the truth. Not long thereafter Stephen of Garlande fell from favor with the king. Let us hope that in this conference we will learn more of the relationships between Suger and Stephen of Garlande and Bernard, relationships which appear in our picture of the politics of Louis' reign like a pentiamento in which one can see the size of the figures but not determine the significance of their gestures.

The abbey bought for 1000 sous a house near the northern gate of Paris as a lodging place for men and horses, as Suger put it, "because of our frequent participation in the affairs of the kingdom." Both Molinier (Vie de Louis le Gros, p. vii) and Panofsky (Abbot Suger, 2nd ed., p. 11) have stated that Suger withdrew somewhat from political affairs after 1127 and deferred to Bernard of Clairvaux, but I doubt if this was the case. Bernard wrote letters, Suger could advise privately, and we all know which is more effective. So closely was Suger's abbacy mixed with his position as royal counselor and confidant under both Louis VI and Louis VII that the history of his career becomes one of the monarchy. Let me pass over the journeys, synods, and negotiations, and to balance the victory over Henry V just mentioned, cite only the great triumph of his final years. When Louis VII left France on the Second Crusade, he named Suger to act as regent along with the archbishop of Reims, Samson Mauvoisin, and his seneschal, Raoul of Vermandois. For two years Suger was for all practical purposes the chief of state: almost all of his surviving

letters date from this regency. When in 1149 the king's brother, Robert of Dreux, broke with the king, returned early from the Crusade, and plotted with Raoul of Vermandois and others against the king, it was Suger who called an assembly of prelates and barons, threatened the plotters with papal excommunication, forced Robert of Dreux into submission, and earned the title his biographer records of "father of his country."

Though, when the occasion demanded it, Suger did not hesitate to appear at the head of armed troupes, his greatest victories were bloodless. In 1124 some counselled a strategy of attack, cutting off the imperial army from flight in order "to slaughter them without mercy like Saracins," but in fact the massive French resistance led the emperor to retreat, preferring humiliation to ruin, giving the French a greater victory, as Suger put it, than one gained in battle. Suger's thwarting of the plot of Robert of Dreux was equally bloodless. Indeed, of all the political leaders of the twelfth century, Suger appears preeminently as a man of peace. Though he expressed violent condemnation of petty "tyrants" like Thomas of Marle and Hugues of Le Puiset, he maintained a respectful attitude towards such opponents as Henry I of England and Thibaut of Blois.

Looking back on his early career when he was about sixty, Suger noted his regret that he had resorted to military force in protecting the abbey's domains in the Vexin and stated that it weighed on his conscience. When he first began reconstruction at the abbey church, he prayed in the chapter that he -- a man of blood like David -- might not be barred from the building of the Temple. A close

reading of his histories shows that images of blood struck Suger's mind with special force. Guibert of Nogent, an observer and commentator, reveled in accounts of the shedding of blood; Suger, a responsible statesman, abhorred it. His policy was stated aphoristically in the salutation to a letter of 1150 to the rebellious bishop, church, and populace of Beauvais (ep. 23), wishing them "peace above and below from the King of kings and the king of the Franks."

Both Suger and his biographers commented on his humble origins; others, moreover, remarked on his small size. As Simon Chèvre d'Or put it:

Small of body and family, constrained by twofold smallness,
He refused in his smallness to be a small man.

Physically as well as socially Suger had to look up to others. In order to reach the power and results he achieved, he must have been, like Abelard, a scambler, but not a man who appears to have been driven or rendered brittle by ambition. It is remarkable that, unlike Abelard (to name only one), Suger seems to have been remarkably free of envy, jealousy. To the best of my knowledge, no contemporary accuses him of invidia. Moreoever, unless I have read too hurriedly, the very word invidia appears nowhere in his writing. People commonly explain the actions of others by emotions with which they are familiar. Suger frequently writes of superbia, but not of invidia. I wonder of what other medieval authors this statement could be made? Not, indeed, of Bernard, Abelard or Guibert. Suger's ideal was probably to possess the qualities of Gelasius II, whom he describes as

acting "glorioso, humiliter, sed strenue." Pride was surely the sin with which Suger had to wrestle most vigorously. Bernard wrote to Suger of "the manner and equipment with which you used to travel, which seemed somewhat extravagant" and "the extravagance (insolentia) of your former way of life" (ep. 78). Suger's writing sings out with self-satisfaction. He gloried in his artistic and administrative achievements, and yet according to his biographer he lived modestly. As Erwin Panofsky put it, "his pride was more institutional than personal."

In the Introduction to the Life of Louis VI which he addressed to his close personal friend, Bishop Josselin of Soissons, Suger declared his intention to raise a monument more lasting than bronze. His surviving writing fills one thick volume: The Life of Louis VI, to which should be added portions of a continuation on the reign of Louis VII, the books on his own administration and the consecration of the church of Saint-Denis, under thirty letters, a will and other miscellaneous documents, and of course, charters. His learning and the influence of both the classics and Scripture are apparent from his writing, but his style is rough, though I would not like to join Henri Waquet in the opinion that he lacked taste. The praise that he resembled Cicero verbally -- "Erat Caesar animo, sermone Cicero" -- applies to his oratory rather than his writing.

Suger left three major monuments, his writings, his administrative and financial reforms, and his artistic achievements. He was a man of massive accomplishments -- and a correspondingly massive sense of self. Although the autobiographical genre did not

yet exist, Suger's writings constitute a sort of autobiography. They do not, of course, tell us many of the things we would like to know, about his family and childhood, for instance, but they are highly personal works. The history of Louis VI is not a biography in the Suetonian sense, but is an account of deeds, *Gesta Francorum* (p. 68), deeds of Suger as well as Louis. Time and again we find "et nos ipsi interfuimus" (p. 52), "et nos fuimus" (p. 56), "nos autem" (p. 145), "per nos" (p. 260), "apud nos" (p. 262), etc.

Suger put his own mark on his administrative reforms in a most peculiar way. His testament, which bears the date of 17 June 1137, should be read side by side with De administratione sua. Suger wanted masses for the dead to be celebrated for himself in all the dependencies of his abbey, and he even wanted them to be spread out through the week: On Mondays and Tuesdays, both, at Argenteuil, the wealthiest of the acquisitions he claimed, or reclaimed, for Saint-Denis. On Wednesdays at Saint-Denis de l'Estrée where he lived for 10 years as a youth. Thursdays at Notre-Dame des Champs near Corbeil, where Suger established a priory. Fridays at Zell which Suger acquired in the diocese of Metz. And finally on Saturdays at Saint Alexander of Lebraha (Lièpvre).

Finally, Suger placed his mark on his church. Four images of Suger and seven inscriptions containing his name appeared in his church, from the entry portal to the Infancy window in the chevet. It is hard to imagine a clearer identification of building and patron in ecclesiastical architecture.

Suger made himself a part of the monuments he left, and he made sure that his name was no forgotten, "so that" as his biographer stated in another context, "today the name of this man is celebrated not only in Gaul (in Galliis) but among foreign peoples." In this conference we are celebrating Suger in a far-flung and temporary obedience of Saint-Denis.

IMPORTANT DATES IN LIFE OF SUGER

1081 (or 1080)	Born
c. 1091	Became oblate at Saint-Denis
c. 1107	Provost of Berneval
c. 1109-1111	Provost of Toury
19 February 1122	Death of Abbot Adam
12 March 1122	Ordained abbot of Saint-Denis
1124	Louis VI takes banner of Vexin from Saint-Denis, repulses Henry V
17 June 1137	Date of Suger's testament (note that Archbishop Samson of Reims was a witness, and Samson did not become archbishop until 1139).
June-August 1137	Suger accompanies Louis VII to Aquitaine for marriage to Eleanor, coronation as king in Poitiers, 8 August
1 August 1137	Death of Louis VI
9 June 1140	Consecration of chapels of St. Romanus, St. Hippolytus and Saint-Denis
14 July 1140	Foundation of choir laid
11 June 1144	Choir consecrated
18 February 1147	Suger named regent
8 March 1149	Suger assembles council at Soissons, counters insubordination of Robert of Dreux
13 January 1151	Death of Suger