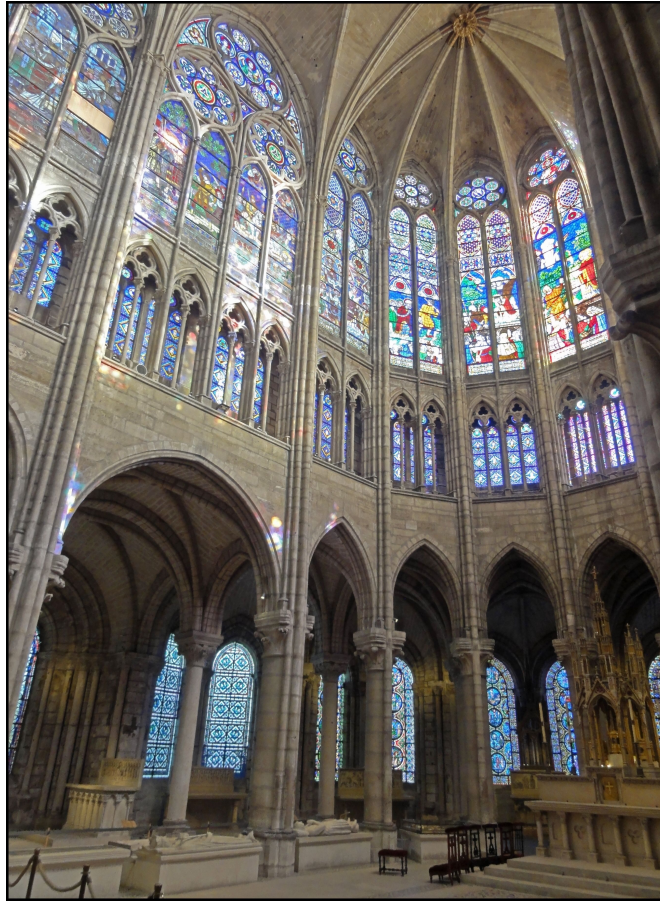


The Church of Saint-Denis and Gothic Architecture

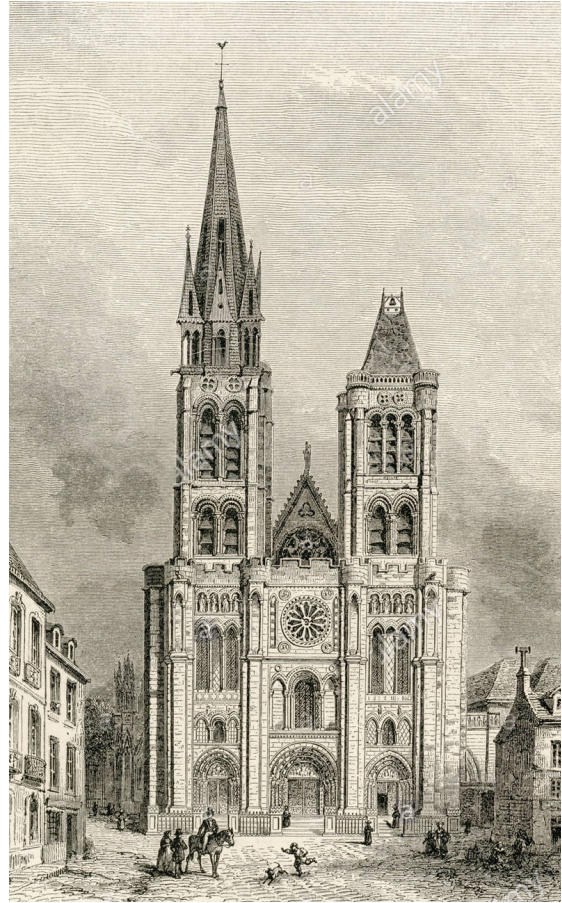
A Case Study

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View of Saint-Denis choir and hemicycle



Saint Denis with north tower before its 1846 demolition

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Abstract

Around the year 1140 CE, a new style of architecture and way of thinking about how to construct buildings developed in Northern France. This way of building soon spread across Europe, seeding cathedrals, monasteries, abbeys, and churches wherever masons traveled. Centuries later – long after masons ceased building in this style – Renaissance architectural theorists began calling this style the “Gothic.”

The one church traditionally associated with this 1140s stylistic shift from the earlier Romanesque style to the newer Gothic style is a small building just north of Paris: the Abbey Church of S-Denis. However, although the popular narrative of architectural history assumes this building to be the world’s first Gothic building, little structural evidence to this effect survives. This thesis follows two strains of inquiry: 1) why this church is deeply associated with the origins of Gothic and 2) how surviving fragments of the 1140s S-Denis fail to support claims of the structure’s primacy.

Why does this matter? S-Denis reveals a tendency to tell history – particularly architectural history – in terms of individual structures when, in fact, the origins of the Gothic style might be more complex. By abandoning a Paris and S-Denis centric origins story, we might be able to better appreciate the diverse array of local sources from which medieval masons found inspiration to build.

Acknowledgements

This paper would have been impossible without the patience and mentorship of professors Barry Bergdoll and Stephen Murray. Professor Bergdoll’s expertise on 19th century French architecture informs the corresponding section of this thesis. I am grateful for my frequent tutorials with Professor Murray over the past three years. I am indebted to my parents, Zemin Zhang and Anne Mabry, for their unwavering patience during this paper’s journey over nine months. Last of all, I am grateful to a “man’s best friend,” my dog, who slept in my lap the many nights I spent writing.

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I. Introduction: What is an architectural narrative?

Stories help make sense of a confusing world. They take a chance sequence of events and assign to them a logical progression toward a fixed goal. They simplify the complexities of history to a few key events and key figures. The 1,000-year-span from the Fall of Rome to the Renaissance is grouped under a monolithic title for all Europe: *the Middle Ages*. While there are thousands of medieval churches, the canon in art history textbooks seems limited to a cluster of cathedrals and great churches in northern France: Amiens, Chartres, Paris, Reims.

An architectural narrative may center complex historical trends around individual artists and structures that illustrate broader ideas. The Columbia Art Humanities curriculum, for example, introduces the Parthenon alongside Amiens Cathedral. Each structure is implicitly representative of a broader and more diverse group of buildings – the Parthenon of Greek architecture in general (and Doric temples in particular) and Amiens cathedral of all Gothic architecture. The principle is that, by instructing students on the details of a single building, they can read all other buildings that fall within the typology of temples, skyscrapers, or (in the case of S-Denis) Gothic churches in general.

This thesis is not a critique of how architectural historians construct stories about buildings; nor is it a comprehensive history of Gothic architecture. Instead, I will offer a critique of the “architectural narrative” generally told about one building: the 12th century abbey church of Saint-Denis,¹ ten miles north of Paris. The existing narrative attributes Saint Denis as the world’s first and original Gothic church, the prototype. This paper takes the position that the narrative is more complex, and that, in fact, a more accurate narrative involves borrowing and appropriation over several churches.

¹ Hereafter abbreviated as S-Denis.

The present narrative constructed around the Abbey Church of S-Denis

Traditionally, art history books introduce: 1) Romanesque architecture – broadly spread across Europe between the 9th and 12th centuries – and 2) Gothic architecture between the 12th and 16th centuries. The turning point between the Romanesque and Gothic styles – the point of evolutionary transition where A becomes B – is identified as the Abbey Church of S-Denis.

In the sixth book of French historian and architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc's *Entretiens sur l'architecture*, he establishes a dialectic between two forces: Greco-Roman and Romanesque. A dialectic involves a struggle between two opposing principles: a thesis and an antithesis. The struggle is resolved in a synthesis. This dialectic can illustrate the clash between Greco-Roman wooden-roofed basilicas and the vaulted structures of the Romanesque. The synthesizing result is Gothic. The cathedral is, according to Viollet-le-Duc, structurally pure because it succinctly resolves the dynamic forces of tension and compression through its buttresses, rib vaults, and linear articulation. And more than visually, the thrust of vaults and arches are physically counteracted and balanced by flying buttresses.² The presence or absence of flyers is a core index in judging a structure to be Romanesque or Gothic. Viollet-le-Duc (among others) further situates S-Denis at the turning point in this seemingly sudden transition from Romanesque to Gothic.³

The monastery church of S-Denis was rebuilt from c.1135 to 1144 by a team of masons (their names lost) under the direction of Abbot Suger (1081-1151) – who was considerate enough to leave posterity with a colorful (although unreliable and spotty) description of his work in three

² Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, *Entretiens sur l'architecture*, (London: 1881).

³ Viollet-le-Duc restored S-Denis in the 1850s – was it in his own interest to elevate his credentials by establishing one of his projects as central to French architectural history?

parts, entitled *De Administratione*, *De Consecratione*, and *Ordinatio*, respectively.⁴ S-Denis was the principal abbey church of the French monarchs among a constellation of other abbeys and pilgrimage sites ringing the environs of Paris. S-Denis, before Suger's intervention, was an old abbey with pre-Carolingian foundations, royal patronage, and a squat, wooden-roofed nave. The nave was most likely descended from the market houses of ancient Rome and the great basilicas of Early Christianity, in perhaps similar style and material to the Old St. Peter's Basilica. In the 1100s, this original church with limited interior spaces was deemed unsuitable for a growing number of pilgrims and clergy, as described by Suger in the opening pages of *De Administratione*. From c.1137, reconstruction began in phases. Around 1140, Suger finished the lower section of the west façade in a quasi-Gothic quasi-Romanesque style. This was followed soon afterwards by the new and expanded chevet with Romanesque-style crypt. At this time, the earlier nave and crossing remained intact and co-existed with Gothic reconstructions. Suger died in 1151, and the church remained in this state of quasi-completion, until later reconstruction of the upper choir and nave in the 13th century, followed by extensive demolition in the 18th century and renovation in the 19th by François Debret and Viollet-le-Duc.

S-Denis neatly fits into a political narrative. In the 12th century, the *Île-de-France* (Paris region) was emerging as a regional power under the Capetian monarchs, who would later go on to conquer the regions around France under King Philip Augustus (ruled 1180-1223) and to play a crucial role in the formation of the French state. The town and abbey of S-Denis were situated in the center of this region – the Abbot Suger of S-Denis was close confidant of the Capetian King Louis VI. After the death and burial of King Louis, Abbot Suger wrote a 100-page

⁴ The full-length titles and their translations are as follows: *Liber de Rebus in Administratione sua Gestis* (On what was done in his [Suger's] administration), *Libellus Alter de Consecratione Ecclesiae Sancti Dionysii* (The other little book on the consecration of the Church of Saint-Denis), and *Ordinatio* (Ordination). Note these titles have been applied retrospectively and not by the author, Suger.

panegyric describing the miraculous accomplishments of his King, entitled *Vita Ludovici Regis* (The Life of King Louis). This document became the evidence on which to canonize King Louis as a Catholic saint; later, “About forty two kings, thirty two queens, sixty three princes and princesses and ten loyal servants of the kingdom were buried in the Basilica of Saint Denis until the nineteenth century,”⁵ including King Louis IX, king of France (1226-70), a crusader, later to be canonized. This combination of events – the leadership of a colorful abbot, the financial support of a future saint, a royal “necropolis” in the crypt and crossing space, and the location at the center of a flourishing region – all contribute to S-Denis’ cultural importance. The innovative and light-filled design of S-Denis’ 12th century chevet might reflect the patronage of Suger and the political aspirations of the Capetian Monarchs, who buried their ancestors at S-Denis. S-Denis the building is inseparable from the history of the French monarchy.

There is something tempting about telling history in terms of individual people, buildings, and artworks that ignite a paradigm shift. Jean Bony opens his chapter on “Gothic Spaciousness” as follows: “There is a particular fascination in the study of beginnings of a movement of art, of the moment when a few men suddenly feel that a new road can perhaps be opened in some unexpected direction.”⁶ When the story turns to Gothic, the search is for the missing link, so to speak, between the Romanesque and Gothic. S-Denis, in many ways, fits the preconceptions well. Its date is from the 1130s-1140s, well before the full proliferation of Gothic across France in the 1200s. Its style is a synthesis of Roman and Early Christian wooden-roofed basilicas and the vaulted structures of the Romanesque – the embodiment of the dialectic. As Christopher Wilson describes S-Denis:

⁵ “Map of the tombs in the Basilica of Saint Denis,” *Seine-Saint-Denis Tourisme*, <https://uk.tourisme93.com/basilica/map-of-the-tombs-saint-denis-basilica.html> (retrieved 23 November 2018).

⁶ Jean Bony, “Gothic Spaciousness,” in *French Gothic Architecture of the 12th & 13th Centuries*, (Berkeley: UC California Press, 1983), p.45.

If the dating evidence were not so secure, it is unlikely that any responsible scholar would ever have assigned it to the early 1140s on the basis of its style. The fact that the choir remained a modern building throughout the late 12th century makes it difficult to accept the widely held view of the development of Early Gothic architecture as a process of gradual and continuous evolution giving rise to new concepts at a uniform rate.⁷

Christopher Wilson and Jean Bony's statements implicitly contrast two schools of architectural thought: 1) Individual structures built by "a few men" (or a key event) ignite a tectonic shift in architectural history; 2) Change occurs gradually over many structures with "a uniform rate" of "continuous evolution."

One might be able to assume that sites of geographic, cultural, and political importance will align with significant buildings in architectural history – the kinds of buildings like S-Denis that anticipate stylistic change. Given that 1) architecture requires patrons; 2) wealthy patrons tend to live in or near centers of power; and 3) wealthy patrons, like Suger, have power and resources to finance innovative architecture, then it would seem "natural" that a royal abbey near Paris should be the origin for the aesthetic shift from Romanesque to Gothic.

⁷ Christopher Wilson, "Abbot Suger's Work at St-Denis," in *The Gothic Cathedral*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1990), p.43. Wilson and Bony authored the two definitive "treatises" on Gothic cathedrals.

II. Problems with this Narrative

There are five reasons why this narrative is problematic: 1. Later changes obscure knowledge of the original design; 2. There is no definite reconstruction of the original form of Suger's upper clerestory; 3. Abbot Suger is an unreliable narrator and source of knowledge; 4. The builders of S-Denis borrowed extensively from existing models. This weakens claims that Suger's S-Denis was especially novel or innovative; 5. The tradition of Gothic architectural storytelling is problematic.

1. Later changes obscure knowledge of the original design.

The problem with tying S-Denis to the origins of Gothic is exacerbated by later changes. The present-day structure bears little resemblance to the original appearance described at Suger's opening ceremony in 1144. The upper levels of the chevet, basically everything above the aisle-level spandrels, were demolished in ~1230s. The supports of the main arcade were replaced, as was the arcade itself. The vaults of the choir aisle and ambulatory were propped up and retained during this process (see fig.1).

When considering how Suger's building aged, it is important to determine why builders rebuilt the chevet in the 1230s. There are two possible reasons; 1) The challenges of building a round chevet at S-Denis with untested and relatively new methods may have resulted in an edifice with structural flaws requiring later rebuilding; 2) Builders may have wanted their high nave to be of equal height of Suger's low chevet. This is the explanation Caroline Bruzelius offers: "Whatever the condition of Suger's chevet, it seems highly probable that the upper stories

were rebuilt in the interest of internal homogeneity. The principles of harmony and unity of design are, after all, among the dominant characters of the [church's] plan and elevation.”⁸

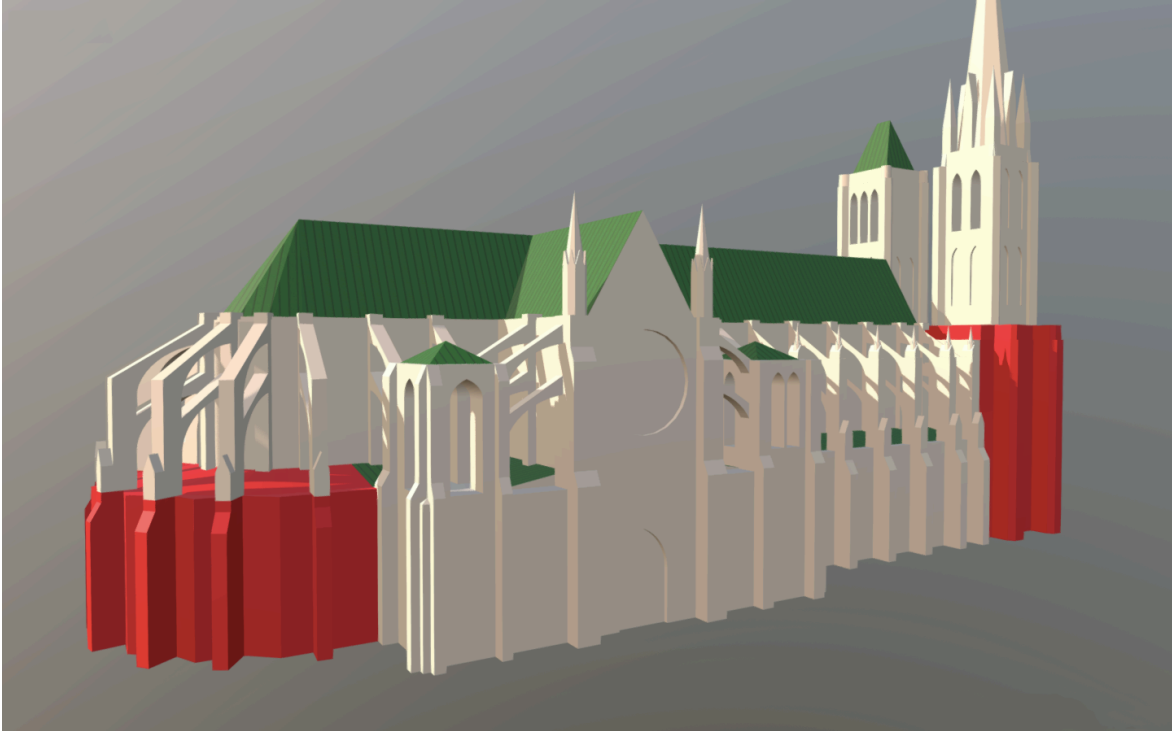
Simultaneous to rebuilding the chevet, the Carolingian nave from the 900s was simultaneously demolished down to the foundation level and rebuilt taller and in the Rayonnant Gothic style following the original bay system, possibly as a cost-saving measure.

Simultaneously, the chevet was rebuilt in its present form with new supports, arcade, and upper wall with glazed triforium and tall windows in a design similar to the upper choir of Troyes Cathedral (from after the 1228 windstorm) and Paris' Sainte-Chapelle (built c.1239-48). Moving centuries forward, most of the decorations, tapestries, metalwork, and (most significantly) the stained glass that Suger describes in *De Consecratione* were lost during the Reformation, before the French Revolution, or simply through the vicissitudes of time. Significantly, the three west-façade trumeaux and many of its statues were lost. And finally, when the antiquarian Debret rebuilt the north tower of the west façade with substandard materials, it threatened collapse after a series of severe storms and was demolished in 1846.⁹ All this is to imply that the sole material basis on which to situate S-Denis as the first Gothic church are the eight Roman-style monolithic columns of the chevet,¹⁰ their 14 pointed arch rib vaults, and a double ambulatory with radiating chapels. How historians reconstruct the original clerestory above this chevet is as much an act of guesswork as archaeological science.

⁸ Caroline Bruzelius, “Construction,” in *The 13th Century Church at St-Denis*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) p.82.

⁹ Jean-Michel Leniaud, “Une simple querelle de clocher? Viollet-le-Duc à Saint-Denis (1846),” *Revue de l'Art*, no. 101 (1993): p.17-28, https://www.persee.fr/doc/rvart_0035-1326_1993_num_101_1_348054.

¹⁰ According to Bruzelius, at least half the columns of Suger's original hemicycle were demolished and replaced with *pilier-cantonnés* in the 1230s, most likely because of structural failure. See *The 13th Century Church of S-Denis*, p.84-85.



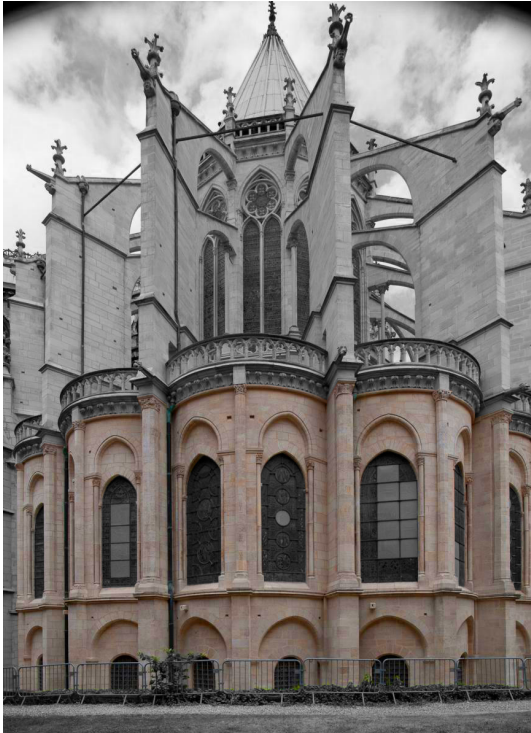
*1. Author's model of S-Denis. Only areas in **red** date from Suger's time. All else is a later reconstruction.*



2. S-Denis Crossing



3. S-Denis Hemicycle



4. Exterior of S-Denis Hemicycle

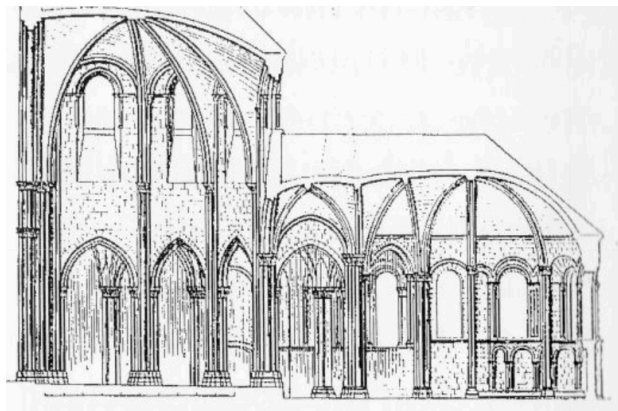
Figures 2-4 indicate the architectural fabric original to Suger's work in the 1140s. Areas in color are original. Areas in black and white are later reconstructions made during the 13th century, a time long after work had begun on other major Gothic cathedrals. Areas in color pre-date the development of Gothic, and can therefore be claimed as predicting the arrival of Gothic. Areas not in color post-date the arrival of Gothic and cannot reasonably be associated with Suger or the 1140s origins of Gothic. The fact that so little survives should lead us to question claims of S-Denis' primacy.

Images from Mapping Gothic

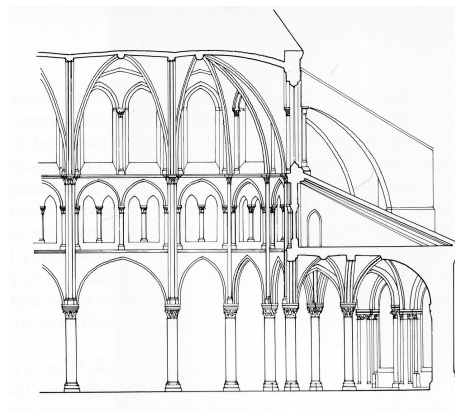
Beyond style and detail, there is a more intangible Gothic quality of S-Denis: its sense of space. Stephen Murray characterizes the Gothic sensibility as the experience of walking down the vertical and channeled hallway of the nave and witnessing a sudden opening up when entering the crossing and beholding the four arms that radiate north, south, east, and west in the cardinal compass directions. Compound columns, pointed arches, and narrow nave bays collectively enhance the impression of Gothic space. But, this spatial experience is not unique to Gothic when numerous churches pre-dating S-Denis are constructed on this cruciform plan. For instance, the Romanesque Durham Cathedral (begun 1093) has a vaulted nave and lantern above the crossing. The lantern, in particular, draws the eye up when one stands at the center. Santiago de Compostela (begun 1075) is also constructed along a cruciform plan. This spatial effect of openness may be more muted than in Gothic, but it is present in Romanesque.

2. There is no definite reconstruction of Suger's upper clerestory.

Flyers are central to the spirit of Gothic architecture. But, Suger's flyers at S-Denis, if, indeed they ever existed, were demolished in the 1230s and rebuilt higher and larger than before to accommodate the rebuilt and expanded clerestory windows. There was certainly buttressing of some type, but its design, appearance, and height are entirely speculative. The presence of flyers is a unique structural innovation that permitted the thinning of the clerestory walls and opening of larger windows. It is a critical index of the point when Gothic departed from the Romanesque.



5. Saint-Martin-des-Champs, cross-section of chevet, current appearance



6. S-Denis, speculative reconstruction of chevet: as modeled after Sens Cathedral (begun c. 1140), assuming 1) S-Denis was had flyers and 2) the chevet was higher than the nave.¹¹

Given the lack of evidence, on what basis do scholars assume S-Denis had flyers? The strongest pieces of evidence are the thick upright buttresses ringing the chevet dating from the 1140s. Their size, heaviness, and lack of tapering, all seem to imply that there were flyers above. But, Saint-Martin-des-Champs, begun c.1140, has comparably large upright buttresses and no flyers – nor did it ever have flyers (fig.5). Additional evidence for flyers is found in the graceful and slender configuration of the lower chevet. The overall design of the chevet included very thin intermediary aisle columns, which were too fragile to support much. It would have also been

¹¹ “Abbot Suger’s Work at St-Denis,” in *The Gothic Cathedral*, p.39.

important to transfer the weight of the upper choir to the outer envelope that has deep buttresses. Flying buttresses transfer the weight away from the structure and thereby permit the clerestory and ambulatory walls to be thinner. If S-Denis lacked flyers, these areas could not have been so thin. So, while the 1140s flyers themselves do not survive, the surviving parts of the structure from the 1140s might point toward their existence. However, the existence of flyers at S-Denis remains speculative. Given that 1) two centuries of scholarship and restoration at S-Denis failed to conclusively answer this question of flyers, and 2) that flyers are central to the development architecture, then the narrative of S-Denis should be questioned because a central index to Gothic might be lacking. If the original flyers at S-Denis were indeed shorter and lower-slung, then the exterior of the chevet would have resembled its predecessor Saint-Martin-des-Champs more closely.

This is what Suger has to say on the subject. Nearly every analysis of *De Consecratione* cites the following passage where Suger ambiguously references what are most likely some sort of flyers:

A force of contrary gales hurled itself against the aforesaid arches, not supported by any scaffolding nor resting on any props, that they threatened baneful ruin at any moment, miserably trembling and, as it were, swaying hither and thither. The Bishop [of Chartres], alarmed by the strong vibration of these [arches] and the roofing, frequently extended his blessing in the direction of that part and urgently held out toward it.¹²

Murray and others read this passage as possibly indicating the presence of flyers. But, there could have been quadrant arches or some kind of never-to-be-replicated way to support the high clerestory. Murray writes: “the high winds could not have caused the interior transverse arches to shake since the clerestory windows were probably blocked by provisional wooden screens. More probably flying buttresses while the interior arches and vaults were still under construction.”

¹² Ibid., Ch.V, p.109.

If S-Denis' chevet had quadrant arches or low-slung flyers in Suger's time, then the original and more conservative design without flyers is linked to earlier and solidly Romanesque churches with internal buttresses like Durham Cathedral pictured below (1093-1135).¹³ From Paul Frankl: "No existing groin vaults with ribs [can] be dated before the choir aisles of Durham Cathedral."¹⁴ If ribbed vaults are defined as *the* index of Gothic, Durham should become the *first* Gothic cathedral – Viollet-le-Duc's dialectic (cited earlier) implies the importance of rib vaults to the Gothic style but makes no mention of flyers. The assumed absence of flyers also strengthens the external similarity between S-Denis' original appearance and contemporaneously constructed Gothic churches, like S-Martin-des-Champs and S-Germer-de-Fly pictured below (fig.7-8) – again strengthening Thomas Polk's multiple origins hypothesis. Another possibility is that S-Denis had flyers, but that they resembled those at Canterbury's Trinity Chapel – low-slung, close to the lean-to-roof, and a transitory type between Durham's quadrant arches and true flying buttresses found in later churches. According to Murray in *Plotting Gothic*:

Parallels may be drawn between the legendary status of the monastery of S-Denis, shrine of the apostles of Gaul, and the church at Canterbury.... The builders of both twelfth-century churches, S-Denis and Canterbury, sought architectural means to respond to and project monastic reform as well as the cult of their resident saints, and the two choirs, essentially shrine churches, had much in common.¹⁵

¹³ Stephen Gardner, "The Nave Galleries of Durham Cathedral," *The Art Bulletin* 64, no. 4 (1982): p.564-79, doi:10.2307/3050268.

¹⁴ Paul Frankl, "The Gothic Rib-Vaults of the First Generation (1093-1120)," in *Gothic Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p.51.

¹⁵ Stephen Murray, "Gervase of Canterbury: *Cronicus* and Logistics Man," in *Plotting Gothic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p.48.



7. Hauts-de-France, Saint-Germer-de-Fly, c.1132.



8. Paris, Saint-Martin-des-Champs, c.1140.



9. Durham Cathedral, internal flying buttresses over south nave aisle. These "quadrant arches" form a gallery at triforium level.



10. Canterbury Cathedral Trinity Chapel, south exterior looking northwest, showing flying buttresses.¹⁶ These flyers are barely extruded above the level of the lean-to-roof, seemingly a transitional form between the quadrant arches at Durham and true flyers that reach above the clerestory level.

¹⁶ Yoshio Kusaba, "Some Observations on the Early Flying Buttress and Choir Triforium of Canterbury Cathedral," *Gesta* 28, no. 2 (1989): p.175-89, doi:10.2307/767067.



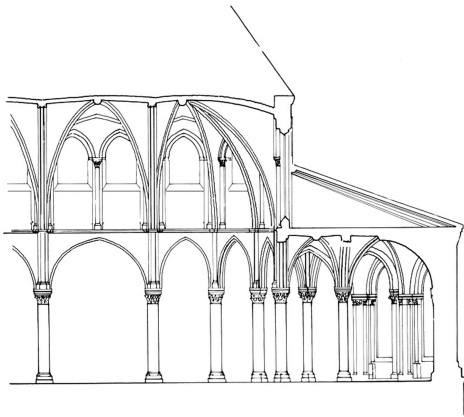
10. *Église Saint-Étienne, nave toward choir*

Pictured here is the Église Saint-Étienne in Beauvais (fig.10), a view from older nave to newer chevet, “The plan is made-up with two different parts; an 1100s nave and transept crossing on to which a 1500s chevet has been grafted.”¹⁷ This may be how S-Denis appeared pre-1230 with chevet and crossing higher than wooden-roofed nave. This is the conclusion Christopher Wilson’s reconstruction leads toward: a three tiered configuration that reveals a Gothic sensibility of space.

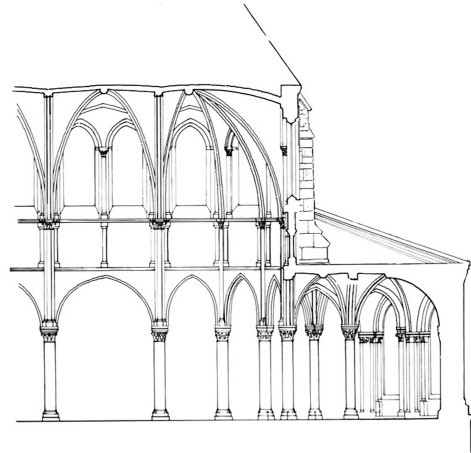
Or, the chevet might have been low enough as to 1) no longer require flyers and 2) be the same in height as the nave. This is what the author’s reconstructions illustrate below. This lower and more Romanesque construction is also in line with Suger’s written desire for the old and new parts to exist in harmony.

Below are five possible reconstructions of the superstructure of S-Denis’ original Gothic chevet, ranging from less to more complex (fig.11-15). Each is determined by a different reconstruction of the flyers. The author created the first four; Christopher Wilson created the fifth. In each reconstruction, the design of the ambulatory and arcade levels are known identical – hence they are identical between reconstructions. The existence of the three-tier arrangement at S-Denis is entirely speculative because the upper levels of the S-Denis chevet (completed 1144) were demolished down to ambulatory level in the 1230s.

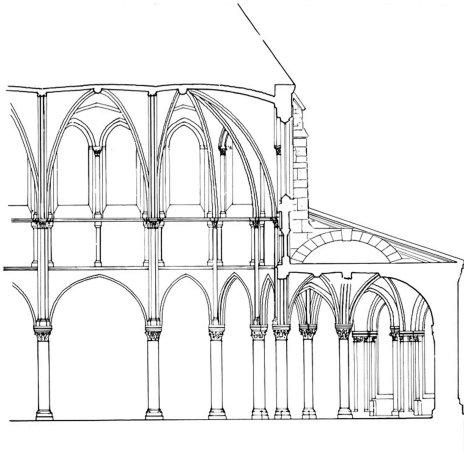
¹⁷ Andrew Tallon, Stephen Murray, et al., “Beauvais, Église Saint-Étienne,” in *Mapping Gothic*, <http://mappingGothic.org/building/1007> (retrieved 23 November 2018).



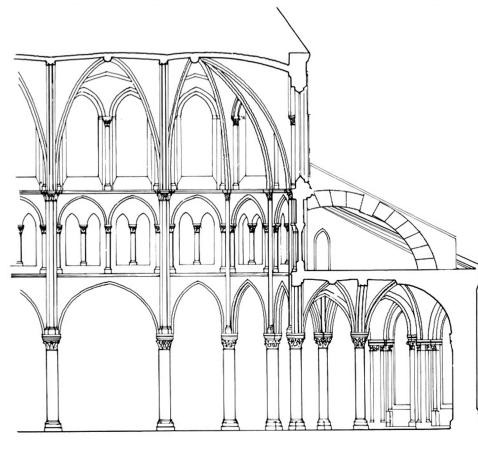
11. Low without buttresses or triforium gallery



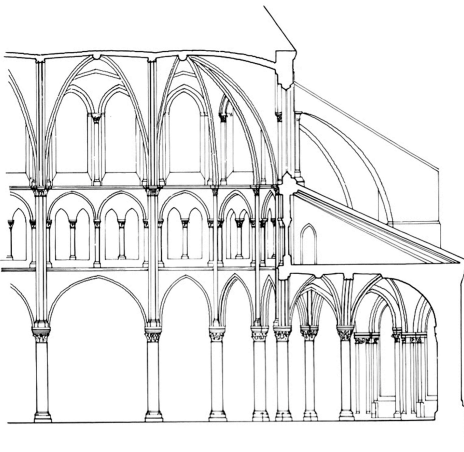
12. With wedge buttresses like S-Martin-des-Champs



13. With hidden support arch in roof



14. With low flying buttresses like Canterbury chevet



15. With high and thick flying buttresses

Proponents of S-Denis will reconstruct a traditionally Gothic design with three-story elevation and triforium (last image). Critics may draw something more Romanesque or closer to S-Martin (first image). The surviving ambulatory level can support any of the above reconstructions. S-Denis is an architectural and cultural *tabula rasa* or *terrain vague*, allowing historians to project multiple narratives depending on their initial assumptions. These uncertainties do not entirely negate but do shed doubt.

3. Abbot Suger is an unreliable narrator and source of knowledge.

S-Denis has a convincing interlocutor to speak for the silent church. Suger's narrative, *De Consecratione*, is unique among primary sources; it is perhaps the only surviving account by a medieval church leader of his intentions for building. No other medieval church, aside from Canterbury Cathedral with the monk Gervase's account of its reconstruction, has a literary description of the building process and a list of those who attended the inaugural ceremony. Rarely do medieval builders leave written testimony of their intentions. Erwin Panofsky opens his preface to his translation of Suger as follows: "Rarely – in fact, all but never – has a great patron of the arts been inspired to write a retrospective account of intentions and accomplishments."¹⁸ When they do, the text is closely studied. Suger speaks of women who "exhibited bloodless faces as in imagined death" due to overcrowding in the old basilica.¹⁹ A "terrible and almost unbearable storm" threatens the unfinished arches and vaults of the new chevet,²⁰ He describes a dedication ceremony of the rebuilt church so spectacular as to be "deemed a symphony angelic rather than human."²¹ In glowing terms, he claims a "glorious and worthy consecration of this church sacred to God."²² Aside from a few cursory mentions of the arches and crypt, Suger does not discuss the building itself in depth; he mainly discusses now lost decorations, tapestries, wall hangings, and the details of the consecration ceremony. Like a storyteller, Suger injects color and emotion into his story and presents the building process as a series of crises that are resolved through subsequent rebuilding and expansion, working toward a fixed end-goal and resolution. In the context of this colorful story, rich in anecdote, it is perhaps

¹⁸ Erwin Panofsky, "Introduction," in *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p.1.

¹⁹ Ibid., "De Consecratione," in *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis*, Ch.II, p.89.

²⁰ Ibid., "De Consecratione," Ch.V, p.109.

²¹ Ibid., "De Consecratione," Ch.VII, p.121.

²² Ibid., "De Consecratione," Ch.I, p.85.

tempting to assume this author a reliable narrator and to assume 1) that the present S-Denis in the Gothic style is true to its appearance in Suger's lifetime and 2) that Suger's narrative implies S-Denis is the first Gothic church (it does not).

By this paper's reconstruction, Suger's innovative chevet completed in 1144 was designed to harmonize with the existing nave from the 900s. This intentional stylistic harmony between Gothic chevet and Romanesque nave resulted in a chevet that is not purely Gothic. In Suger's own description of the Carolingian nave:

Deliberating under God's inspiration, we choose – in view of that blessing, which by the testimony of the venerable writings, divine action had bestowed upon the ancient consecration of the church by the extension of [Christ's] own hand – to respect the very stones, sacred as they are, as though they were relics; [and] to endeavor to ennoble the new addition [of the chevet].²³

Later in this paragraph, Suger describes his efforts to equalize the vaults, aisles, and height of the old nave with those of the new chevet. Suger's work on S-Denis results in either 1) the first-ever Gothic church (i.e. the conventional narrative) or 2) merely a quasi-Gothic appendage to a Romanesque nave. Note how he describes the chevet as an "addition" to the ancient nave – not as a "replacement" to the original.

Suger also describes his church as being unified and complete – this fact might lead readers to conclude that he intended to make no further changes to the pre-Gothic nave. After all, the Carolingian nave may have been outmoded and small, but it was sacred due to the belief that Christ himself consecrated the space in the 900s. Erwin Panofsky also noted that Suger's writing adopts a defensive tone in his writing, as if justifying his remodeling and decorations from other clerics' criticisms. Panofsky writes: "Time and again Suger interrupts his enthusiastic descriptions of gleaming gold and precious jewels to counter the attacks of an imaginary opponent who is in fact not imaginary at all but identical with the man [Saint Bernard of

²³ "*De Consecratione*," Ch.IV, p.101.

Clairvaux, who criticized Suger's visual excess."²⁴ The sacredness of the Carolingian nave combined with pushback from members of his own community (toward the end of his life) may have led Suger to proceed with caution. However, the post-1144 laying of foundations for the north transept weakens the claim that S-Denis was deemed complete before Suger's death in 1150. The important takeaway is 1) that the construction narrative is more complex than it first seems and 2) that the current architectural narrative asserts S-Denis as the first Gothic church, even though the nave, crossing, and transepts of this church were of construction and design in an antique style.

At the conclusion of *De Consecratione* in 1144 and Abbot Suger's life in 1151, S-Denis was a mixture of styles, Romanesque/Gothic hybrid frontispiece, Carolingian nave, and semi-Gothic chevet. By this author's analysis, S-Denis originally lacked the stylistic consistency, compound piers, soaring clerestory, and large dimensions – features associated with later and indisputably Gothic cathedrals. Today, a visitor to S-Denis sees a stylistically and visually unified interior and, if told this church dates from the 900s, might assume it to be the first. But this unity is a later accomplishment.

In searching for the origins of Gothic, church size and height is an important driver of technological innovation. Bishops and clergy demanded builders construct increasingly large and well-lit interiors. This pushed the materials to their limit and required masons to produce structural innovations – like pinnacles, pointed arches, flying buttresses, etc. – that are now associated with Gothic. If the culmination of Gothic structural achievement is in the impressively large cathedrals of Beauvais and Cologne, then the first Gothic structure should be necessarily large – that is, a building of sufficient scale to require innovation. In comparison to S-Denis, almost all the major French Gothic cathedrals are significantly larger and taller. In fact, S-Denis

²⁴ Erwin Panofsky, "Introduction," in *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis*, p.15.

began its life as an abbey church and only later gained “cathedral” status in the 1800s. In fact, Suger’s choir measures only ~30 feet across – small by medieval standards. Yet, Suger goes so far as to write that S-Denis’ relics and beauty rivaled Hagia Sophia in Constantinople²⁵ – a claim this author doubts considering Hagia Sophia is much larger and structurally more complex than S-Denis. All that glitters is not gold. When Suger uses colorful adjectives to describe his work, readers should be cautious in accepting these claims at face value since the narrative he constructs around S-Denis does not match the structure’s actual appearance or size.

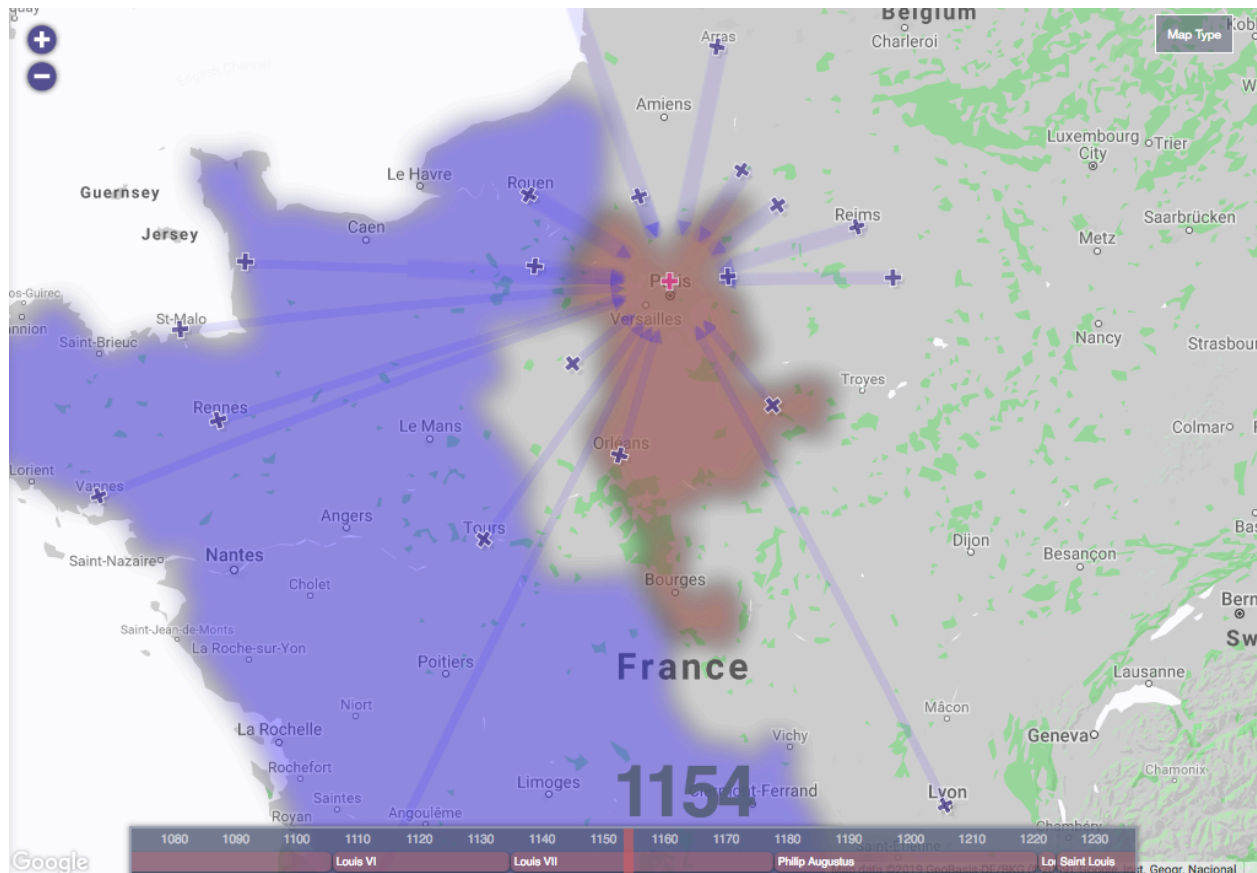
4. The builders of S-Denis borrowed extensively from existing models. This undermines claims that S-Denis was especially novel or innovative.

France’s geography would seem to support claims of S-Denis’ primacy. Trade and pilgrimage routes, as much now as in the medieval period, converged on cities²⁶ – thereby enabling easier communication from center to periphery than from periphery to periphery. Suger lists those who attended the inaugural ceremony of his church in 1144, “together with the archbishops of Lyons, Reims, Tours and Rouen, and the Bishops of Soissons, Beauvais, Rennes, Senlis, St.-Malo, Meaux, and Vannes,”²⁷ as well as Canterbury, Auxerre, Châlons, Noyon, Arras, Coutances, Evreux, Cambrai, Bordeaux, Orleans, Chartres, Sens, Soissons, and Thérouanne. Incidentally, each of those leaders returned to their homes and began rebuilding their churches in the “Gothic” style.

²⁵ “*De Administratione*,” Ch.XXXIII, p.65.

²⁶ Some pilgrimage centers, like Conques, were small.

²⁷ Ibid., “*Ordinatio*,” p.131. C.f. The list of attendees on p.113: “We sent invitations by many messengers, also by couriers and envoys, through almost all the districts of Gaul and urgently requested the archbishops and bishops [...] to be present at so great a solemnity.”



16. Caption from Mapping Gothic: “The map also shows the power of the royal monastery of S-Denis to attract leading ecclesiastics from far-flung centers. The inward-pointing arrows represent the passage of those ecclesiastics to S-Denis. On returning home, many of them rebuilt their churches: this was the force of desire that lies behind ‘Gothic.’”²⁸

Here there are three pieces of data that historians seem to link: 1) The abbey of S-Denis was centrally located near the center of the Capetian kingdom (i.e. Paris); S-Denis benefitted from royal patronage and proximity to power; 2) In *De Consecratione*, Suger listed the powerful clergy who attended S-Denis’ 1144 consecration; 3) The following decades saw the demolition and rebuilding of numerous churches in the Gothic style of S-Denis, including many of the churches of clergy who attended Suger’s ceremony. This seems to support the claim that those who attended Suger’s ceremony were directly inspired to rebuild and model their churches on this model. But, these clerics may have traveled more extensively across France and Italy, and

²⁸ Andrew Tallon, Stephen Murray, et al., “Animated Map,” in *Mapping Gothic*, <http://mappingGothic.org/mapping>, (retrieved 4 March 2019).

were certainly acquainted with other early Gothic structures like Saint-Martin-des-Champs or Noyon Cathedral. That no evidence to this fact survives does not mean that no evidence of this existed considering that 1) few written records survive from the medieval period and 2) much of medievalists' efforts are expended toward filling these resulting holes.

Medievalists like Murray, Wilson, Bony, and Frankl speculate that the clergy and masons of the provincial towns around Northern France and beyond looked inward toward the center of the Capetian domaine – in the Paris region – for existing buildings on which to model their local churches. By copying S-Denis' Gothic style and structural innovations, the local clergy and nobility expressed, through architecture, their allegiance to the crown. To copy the king's church becomes an act of fealty to the monarch. Arnaud Timbert writes:

*La constatation de cette réalité stylistique est interprétée par les auteurs en terme politique : « chaque parti adoptant l'architecture de son protecteur respectif », comme l'illustrent les exemples de Saint-Martin et de Notre-Dame d'Étampes, deux églises contemporaines dont la première, relevant de l'archevêque de Sens, emprunte son style à la cathédrale Saint-Étienne quand la deuxième, de fondation royale, se tourne vers Paris, matérialisant ainsi « des relations politico-religieuses ».*²⁹

If, accepting Timbert's statement, clergy model their buildings on those of their respective protector, then an interpretive problem arises. In 1144, as S-Denis approached Suger's inaugural ceremony, the Capetian kingdom stretched no further than the 100 mile radius surrounding Paris. The remaining regions of Northern and Central France were tied to Paris only by loose alliances or actively competed with the Capetians. Despite the size of the Capetian domaine, many bishops

²⁹ Translation: The observation of this stylistic reality is interpreted by the authors in political terms: "each party adopts the architecture of its respective protector," as illustrated by the examples of Saint-Martin and Notre-Dame d'Étampes, two contemporary churches the first of which, under the archbishop of Sens, borrows its style from the Saint-Étienne cathedral when the second, of royal foundation, turns to Paris, thus materializing "politico-religious relations."

Arnaud Timbert, "Existe-t-il une signification politique de l'architecture gothique au XIII^e siècle ? L'exemple des chevets de Saint-Denis et de Saint-Germain-des-Prés," *Les Cahiers d'Histoire de l'Art*, no. 5 (2007): p.13-25.

and abbots had strong connections with the crown, thereby extending the effective sphere of influence well beyond Paris.

The argument that S-Denis is the first Gothic church and that all others in some way are modeled on or respond to S-Denis makes less sense in the 1150s when 1) the cathedral craze was only starting and 2) Capetian power (which S-Denis symbolized through its royal connections) was challenged by the Plantagenets. However, by the 1200s, when construction was beginning on most of the major high Gothic churches, there would have been a wide range of existing models and structures builders could pick and choose from. The equally powerful tendency might be to model churches on other sources of local inspiration. For instance, the 13th century abbey church of Corbie is clearly modeled on the façade of neighboring Amiens Cathedral, only 10 miles away. Or, in the later years of Gothic, Eastern European churches consciously modeled themselves after existing structures in Western Europe. In this context of copying and appropriation, Jean Bony's *French Gothic Architecture of the 12th & 13th Centuries* examines the sources of artistic inspiration and the geographic spread of the Gothic style: the ribbed groin vault with pointed arches (p. 14 and p. 112); the four story elevation (p. 112); the clerestory passage (p. 298); and the tribune gallery (p. 300) – each of which is incidentally linked to a geographic sphere of influence that may correspond to different centers of power. Bony's analysis seems to support the idea of multiple spheres of competing architectural influence.

The narrative of S-Denis becomes more complicated during the 13th century reconstructions. The master mason employed to rebuild S-Denis used Reims and others as models. Bruzelius cites approximately three dozen possible models over 22 pages from which builders picked and chose from: "The design of St-Denis is the result of wide exposure to

sources in Normandy, Picardy, Burgundy, the Ile-de-France, and the Champagne.”³⁰ Bony identifies about a dozen possible sources over 14 pages.³¹ This reconstruction work was extensive and resulted in the demolition of approximately 80% of the fabric existing in Suger’s lifetime. Bony writes that this reconstruction “should be attributed to some, slightly earlier, Parisian master, the same who had redesigned a few years before the upper stories of the choir of Troyes cathedral (following their destruction by a hurricane in 1227) and who was on that showing called to S-Denis.”³² Bony observed that the upper clerestories of Troyes (1227) and S-Denis (1231) were almost identical – hence likely originated from the same mason. Similarly, Frankl writes that:

The great round window in the south transept at Reims had probably been designed, if not executed, by 1233, and the west rose of Notre-Dame in Paris was under construction in the 1220s. The Saint-Denis master copied them and improved upon them by increasing their size, and by making some of the details more delicate.³³

The flyers of both upper clerestories also suffered from possible damage inflicted by high winds, as indicated Suger’s passage from *De Consecratione*. This fact leads us to question if S-Denis can be claimed as the first when its 13th century design is clearly modeled on existing prototypes.

The thesis of Caroline Bruzelius in *The 13th Century Church at S-Denis* is expressed in the concluding lines as she writes:

The rebuilding of St-Denis in the thirteenth century can now be seen as one of the first steps in the development of the Rayonnant Gothic style. . . . The redating of the complete design of St-Denis to 1231 has important implications for our knowledge of the development of the Rayonnant Gothic style. Rather than being a program “arrived at” in the 1230s, when other experiments in the Rayonnant direction were already under way, St-Denis must be seen as a point of departure for the new sensibility.³⁴

³⁰ Caroline Bruzelius, “Sources and Influences,” in *The 13th Century Church at St-Denis*, p.139.

³¹ Jean Bony, “The Saint-Denis Style,” in *French Gothic Architecture of the 12th & 13th Centuries*, p.366-80.

³² Ibid., p.370.

³³ Paul Frankl, “The High Gothic Style (1194-1300),” in *Gothic Architecture*, p.127.

³⁴ Caroline Bruzelius, “Conclusion,” in *The 13th Century Church at St-Denis*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p.161.

Bruzelius' text imposes a new claim – that S-Denis is the one of the first Rayonnant Gothic churches. The Rayonnant Gothic, in contrast to the heavier and thicker early Gothic of Suger, was a later development, in some ways constituting the crescendo of Gothic architecture. If accepting both claims, then S-Denis is simultaneously the first early Gothic church and the first Rayonnant Gothic church – simultaneously the early and late Gothic depending on the narrative one follows. It is possible S-Denis remained a site of architectural innovation for the century from the 1130s and the 1230s, validating both theses. The complexity of S-Denis construction sequence seems to allow the viewer to project multiple and conflicting narratives, a *tabula rasa* or Schrödinger's cat of sorts. (See fig.11-15 on p. 18.)

The idea of borrowing and appropriation is central to the narrative of Gothic architecture. Clergy moved between abbeys and monasteries. Masons moved between building sites. And pilgrims moved between cities. The thesis, for instance, of Erwin Panofsky's *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* is that buildings followed and reflected the spread alongside new ideas in philosophy and education.³⁵ This movement of people and ideas naturally resulted in a complex inter-pollination between buildings with stylistic features being assembled and amalgamated from a variety of existing sources.

This borrowing is possibly more complex than the movement from center to periphery – that is from Paris and S-Denis to the border regions at the edge of the Capetian kingdom, like the spokes radiating from the center of Saint Catherine's wheel. This borrowing is also more complex than the adoption of a single model, followed by the rapid and exact replication of that model in other regions. As expressed by John Ruskin in his admiration for Venice, the beauty of Gothic results from its variety, inventiveness, and numerous regional variants of the church

³⁵ Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism: An inquiry into the analogy of the arts, philosophy, and religion in the Middle Ages*, (New York: Meridian Books, 1957).

“prototype,” such as the trapezoid-shaped porch common to Northeastern France and Western Germany, the brick construction more common to Albi and Southern France, or the wood-roofed Romanesque naves of the Bourbonnais. However, the narrative of primacy – or the notion that a single church is *the original* and the *mother church* of all others – seemingly negates and sidelines these connections, replacing this complexity instead with an overarching narrative of the Capetian Empire swallowing up Northern France and imposing the Saint-Denis model over the diverse architectural landscape.

Here emerges a contrast between prime movers. Bony claims that elements of Gothic, like pointed arches and groin vaults, move from one place to another by “travel.”³⁶ Travel implies that the image of the pointed arch of S-Denis is picked up and replicated exactly, something analogous to the numerous duplicates of the Parthenon scattered as far as Edinburgh, Scotland and Nashville, Tennessee. In contrast to Bony’s “travel,” Murray claims Gothic spread across France through “desire.”³⁷ Clergy and masons would have looked at existing Gothic churches around them, admired their beauty, and would have *desired* to copy them. But, in the absence of measured plans, photographs, and the documentary tools of today, the act of “copying” becomes an act of interpretation. Thus, there are countless medieval derivations of Jerusalem’s dome of the Holy Sepulcher, all seemingly different and unique interpretations spread across Western Europe. There are similarly as many derivations of the great Gothic churches like Amiens and Saint-Denis.³⁸

The traditional narrative implies that S-Denis came first, and then this church “travelled” Europe, seeding clones of the three-story internal elevation and groin vault across France. This

³⁶ Stephen Murray, “Conclusion: Gothic Plots,” in *Plotting Gothic*, p.212.

³⁷ Jean Bony, “The Technical Bases of Gothic Architecture,” in *French Gothic Architecture of the 12th & 13th Centuries*, p.17-21.

³⁸ Krautheimer, Richard, “Introduction to an ‘Iconography of Mediaeval Architecture,’” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, no. 5 (1942): p.1-33, doi:10.2307/750446.

thesis claims instead that, by the year 1200 when construction began on most major cathedrals, clergy looked around the architectural landscape and desired to copy from various sources. These interpretive copies became unique structures: with squat dimensions in Italy where frequent earthquakes would have threatened steeples; with red brick in Albi where masons lacked access to limestone; with tribune galleries in Northern France and Southern England, etc. These alleged derivations from S-Denis are far enough from and aesthetically different from “the original” as to be unique works in their own right – the first of their kind in their sub-genre within the monolithic style later called *the Gothic centuries*.

On a related note, there are numerous contemporary variations on S-Denis’ “innovative” chevet. S-Denis has a rounded chevet with pointed arches, ambulatory, radiating chapels, and rib vaults – all features characteristic of Gothic. This chevet has, in turn, a central altar space (now modified) around which two passages curve – an inner ambulatory and an outer ambulatory – opening into a row of spatially linked, radiating chapels. A row of Roman-style monolithic columns divides the two passages and forms a forest of supports. In addition, the interior is probably divided vertically into roughly equidistant bays and horizontally into three registers: 1) a lower row of arcade arches; 2) an upper row of clerestory windows; and 3) a triforium level of smaller arches between arcade and clerestory. Yet Noyon Cathedral, Saint-Germer-de-Fly, and Saint-Martin-des-Champs all date from around 1130-40s; their start of construction possibly predates S-Denis by a few years, and all three exhibit the kind of chevet described above.³⁹ Additionally, the piers at S-Denis are Roman-style monolithic columns – in emulation of the co-existing 9th century Romanesque nave. But, the supports at Saint-Martin-des-Champs and Saint-Germer-de-Fly are compound piers – more characteristic of the later direction of Gothic. As Thomas Polk writes in his Ph.D. dissertation:

³⁹ Seymour and Timbert say construction on these structures began in the 1140s-50s, but Polk argues for 1130s-40s.

That the criteria [i.e. compound piers and rib vaults] which have been used for dating Noyon later than S-Denis are invalid raises further implications for judging the whole development of twelfth-century-architecture. Namely, the same criteria have been applied in dating all twelfth-century churches, which are conventionally accepted as deriving from Saint-Denis. Contrary to this accepted belief, it is probable that many of these building campaigns preceded or were contemporary with those recorded at S-Denis. This, of course, greatly complicates the question of priority and influence. Reciprocity of influences cannot be discounted; indeed, it must be counted upon.⁴⁰

While the dating of structures contemporaneous to S-Denis is less secure, the possibility of their contemporaneous construction should be reason to suspect a multiple-origins-hypothesis for Gothic architecture. In fact, many stylistic features associated with Gothic come from unknown or various origins. The idea of flying buttresses may have been derived from Hagia Sophia or from Durham Cathedral.⁴¹ Carpenters had long used diagonal wooden props to support the cathedral while still under construction; it is no stretch of the imagination to imagine builders realizing these temporary wooden supports could be replaced with permanent ones in stone. Pointed arches might have been derived from Muslim-controlled Spain, Italy, or from the Near East directly, as Christopher Wren later claimed. Or, Renaissance theorists claimed that pointed arches originated from the tops of trees, which primitive Gothic tribesmen tied together to form natural dwellings. Stephen Murray questions: “If the column was a sign of Christian triumph over Roman pagan origins, did pointed arches and rib vaults bring memories of their early use in Islamic architecture, pointing to another kind of Christian triumph?” The fact this multiple-origins-hypothesis is not commonly presented in art history textbooks might reflect how art history textbooks implicitly discourage complex narratives for lack of room.

⁴⁰ Thomas Polk, “Conclusion,” in *The Early Gothic Chevets of S-Denis and Noyon: Methodological Considerations*, (PhD diss., Pennsylvania State University, 1976), p.211.

⁴¹ The idea of the pointed arch “traveling” comes from Jean Bony.

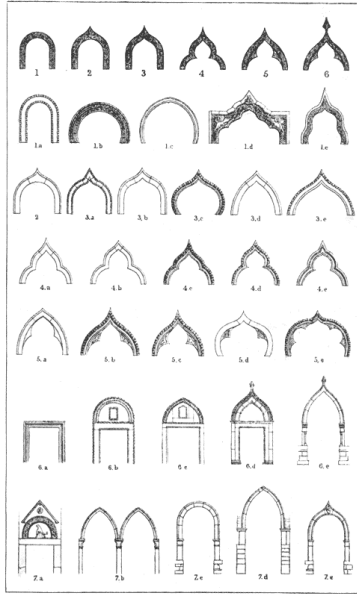
5. The tradition of Gothic architectural storytelling is problematic.

As the high clerical status of those attending Suger's ceremony indicates, the religious importance of S-Denis was already well established in the medieval period. But, the abbey's significance in the history of architecture was not a medieval idea. In the 1800s, there evolved a new narrative claiming S-Denis' architectural importance, alongside concurrent advances in architecture, philosophy, and science. As interest in medieval architecture grew, German and French art historians re-examined S-Denis. According to Bony, the Polish mathematician and scientist Franz Mertens first circulated the idea of S-Denis in 1843.⁴²

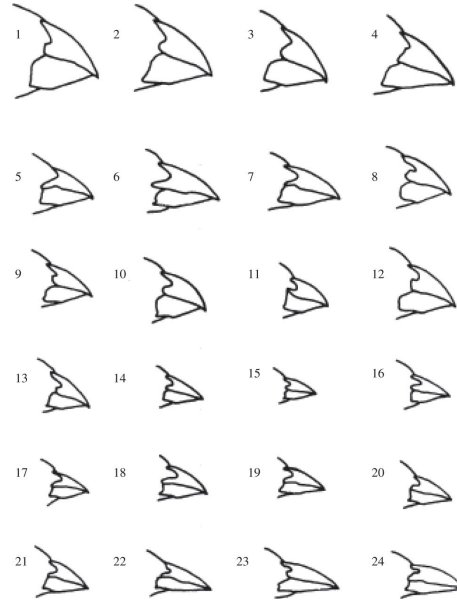
In 1853, English social critic John Ruskin published *The Stones of Venice* with an illustration in Volume II showing the linear evolution of simple Romanesque shapes into complex Gothic forms – an image illustrative of 1800s architectural philosophy. And, in 1859, Darwin published his *Origin of Species*, which identified the mechanisms through which species evolve, diverge, and transform. According to Stephen Murray, the story of S-Denis is related to: “the Darwinian developmentalism that had, in older scholarship, been such a feature of the study of the style in art history and especially the study of Gothic: a compulsive search for the origins of species.”⁴³

⁴² Paul Frankl, “Diagonality of shafts, multipartite vaults, pointed arches, and keystones,” in *Gothic Architecture*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1962), p.61: “The Significance of Saint-Denis as the first building of the Early Gothic style was first recognized in 1806 by Dallaway and in 1809 by Whittington, then again in 1843 by Franz Mertens, and independently, at the same time, by Kugler and Schnaase.”

⁴³ Stephen Murray, “Abbot of S-Denis, and the Rhetoric of Persuasion,” in *Plotting Gothic*, p.77.



17. John Ruskin wandered the Venetian lagoon, sketching the various doors he saw and then condensing their variety to illustrate a stylistic evolution from simple to complex forms.⁴⁴



18. Darwin hopped islands in the Galapagos, observing the varieties of finch on each and attributing the shape of bird beaks to the unique climatic conditions on each island.⁴⁵

But, history is more complex than the linear evolution of Darwin's finches or Ruskin's Venetian arches. Medieval France was fractured into political, linguistic, and geographic regions. The vivid descriptions of medieval life, the sounds of peasants and church bells, and the appearance of cities with their "innumerable protruding towers" in Johan Huizinga's *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* might come closest to approximating medieval lived experience.⁴⁶ But, the thoughts of medieval masons and their sources of inspiration – from close observation of other churches, from their own sheer ingenuity, or from divine inspiration – will remain unknowable.

In the 1800s narrative, Gothic architecture is claimed as a *French* phenomenon; Gothic architecture emerged as an expression of nationalist sentiment. Particularly in England,

⁴⁴ John Ruskin, "The Orders of Venetian Arches," in *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 2, 1853.

⁴⁵ Image from: Every inch a finch: a commentary on Grant (1993) 'Hybridization of Darwin's finches on Isla Daphne Major, Galapagos' *Graham Bell Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B* 2015 370 20140287; DOI:10.1098/rstb.2014.0287. Published 6 March 2015.

⁴⁶ Johan Huizinga (auth.) and Ulrich Mammitzsch (trans.), *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Neoclassical architecture had strong Continental implications and associations with foreign Italy. As reflected in Pugin's book *Contrasts*, Gothic represented both an architectural style and a suite of cultural/moral attitudes associated with this style.⁴⁷ Considering the importance of the Gothic style to Anglo-French national identity, there may have been a cultural motivation not to attribute Gothic to external powers like Germany, even though Germany had important contributions. Similarly, the narrative may be less "interesting" if Gothic were attributed to any one of the more remote churches beyond Paris, whose masons and construction sequence are unknown. By claiming a medieval and specifically monarchic, Catholic, and *Île-de-France* origin for Gothic, the style is linked more tightly to the French identity. S-Denis with its royal tomb program fits this cultural agenda better than a more isolated church or less powerful abbey about which less is known, such as Noyon.⁴⁸ Also, a church, which no longer exists in its original form, exerts particular fascination. As Arnaud Timbert writes:

*Il convient en effet de ne pas oublier qu'une telle interprétation émane en partie des vapeurs d'un nationalisme exacerbé ; si elle trouve indubitablement une part de son origine dans la réalité historique médiévale, l'autre se confond avec la volonté intellectuelle de donner à la France du début du XIXe siècle son identité nationale en nouant ces racines à celles des cathédrales.*⁴⁹

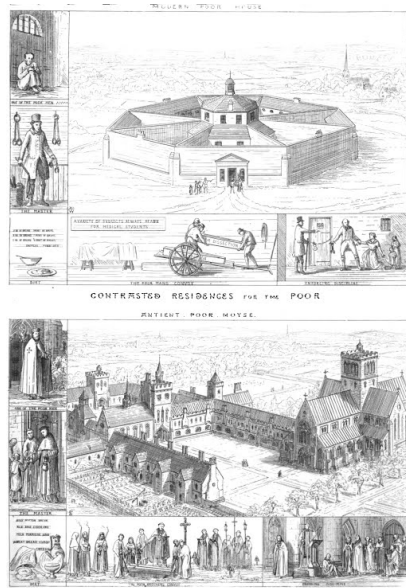
The causal links are weak to non-existent between Pugin's *Contrasts*, Ruskin's *Stones of Venice*, and Viollet-le-Duc's dialectic. But, these texts hint at a certain, shared interpretive framework and a possibly reductive way of narrating architectural history. Critiques of *Contrasts* frequently note how Pugin distorts the appearance of structures to present the Neoclassical from

⁴⁷ Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, *Contrasts or, a Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries and Similar Buildings of the Present Day shewing the Present Decay of Taste Accompanied by Appropriate Text* (London: James Moyes, 1836).

⁴⁸ Georg Hermann, *Aux Origines du Patrimoine Bâti*, (Paris: Infolio, 2009).

⁴⁹ Arnaud Timbert, "Existe-t-il une signification politique de l'architecture gothique au XIIe siècle ? L'exemple des chevets de Saint-Denis et de Saint-Germain-des-Prés." Translation: It should be remembered that such an interpretation emanates in part from the vapors of exacerbated nationalism; if it undoubtedly finds a part of its origin in the medieval historical reality, the other is confused with the intellectual will to give France at the beginning of the 19th century its national identity by linking these roots to those of cathedrals.

a more negative and the Gothic from a more positive angle of view. Through drawing, Pugin restores structures, like the entrance to Oxford's Christ Church college – minus Christopher Wren's Gothic Revival steeple (fig.20) – to a state that “never existed at any time” (to borrow a phrase from Viollet-le-Duc). Similarly, the above illustration from Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* assumes ogee arches, for instance, to have evolved gradually and linearly (fig.17).



19. “Contrasted Residences for the Poor”
50



20. “Contrasted College Gateways”

S-Denis is as much a literary construction on the pages of a book as it is a building – largely a consequence of more students and scholars visiting S-Denis through pictures than in person (this author included). The same challenge now attends students reading Suger, Pugin, or Panofsky and needing to separate what others say about the building from what the building can speak about itself.

⁵⁰ Ibid., *Contrasts*.

III. Case Study of S-Martin-des-Champs

Saint-Martin des Champs: A contemporaneous building muddies S-Denis' primacy.

So far, this thesis has examined problems with claiming S-Denis to be the first church. But, let us examine another candidates for the first church, assuming there is such a phenomenon in Gothic architecture as *the* first and *the* original. Assuming that the c.1144 appearance of the S-Denis choir and hemicycle was similar to one of the first four reconstructions on page 18, then the original S-Denis would have been one of several similar structures, all built in the same region and during the same period. The geographic range of this early Gothic variant on the hemicycle could be, theoretically, plotted onto one of Bony's maps described earlier. This group of churches would include the hemicycles of Saint-Martin-des-Champs, Saint-Germer-de-Fly, Noyon_Cathedral, Cluny Abbey, and possibly other structures (now abandoned or ruined) like Jumièges. This thesis could examine each of these similar structures and how they challenge S-Denis. But, the examination of one case study, Saint-Martin-des-Champs, should be sufficient in illustrating the range of possible ways to muddy the narrative.

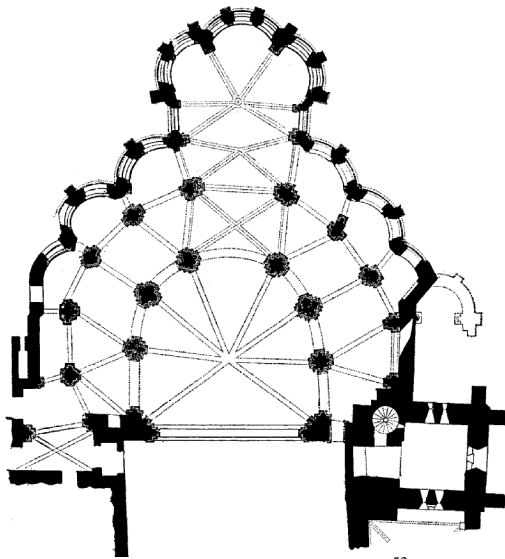
The rebuilt chevet of the monastery church of Saint-Martin-des-Champs⁵¹ (begun in the 1130s)⁵² predates and exhibits many of the same "Gothic" features as S-Denis. Like S-Denis, S-Martin began with early medieval foundations in the Merovingian era (450-714), was rebuilt in the 1100s, remodeled in the 1200s, and suffered significant damage in the French Revolutionary era. Both began their lives as well-endowed monastery churches in the 1100s. While S-Denis became the burial place for almost all French monarchs, including Louis XVI and Marie

⁵¹ Hereafter abbreviated as S-Martin.

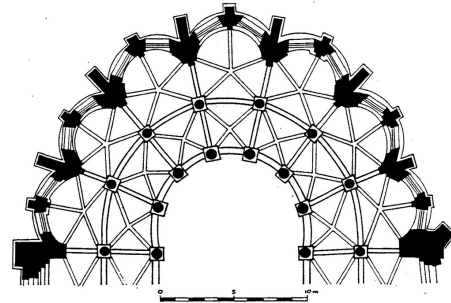
⁵² Philippe Plagnieux, "*Le chevet de Saint-Martin-des-Champs à Paris incunable de l'architecture gothique et temple de l'oraison clunisienne*," *Bulletin monumental*, no. 167 (2009): p.3-39.

Also according to "Église Saint-Martin-des-Champs," in *Mapping Gothic*: "There is no textual evidence for the work of reconstruction on the choir [of S-Martin]: most historians have placed it in the decade 1130-40 during the period of priors Eudes I (1126-31), Mathieu II (1131-20 and Thibaud II (1132-43) at a time the priory enjoyed the generosity of the kings of England as well as France."

Antoinette and ultimately achieved cathedral status, S-Martin became the secular *Musée des arts et métiers* around the time that the story of S-Denis primacy was beginning to circulate.



21. S-Martin-des-Champs, chevet begun 1140.⁵³ Note how only some of the vaults have ribs. Ribs first appeared at Durham and were gradually incorporated into later churches. (~13 meters diameter of hemicycle)



22. S-Denis, chevet begun c.1140.⁵⁴ Note the more consistent use of ribs than at S-Martin. For Christopher Polk's analysis of Noyon, ribs are an important (although problematic) basis for dating. Two plans rendered to same scale. (~10 meters diameter of hemicycle)

The construction of S-Martin is also contemporaneous to S-Denis: Around 1140, an unknown mason reconstructed the chevet of S-Martin under the direction of Abbot Hugues de Semur. The upper levels of S-Martin's chevet are also original to the 1100s, unlike the remodeled S-Denis'.⁵⁵ Thus, S-Martin's chevet may more accurately illustrate masons' first experiments in Gothic. But, while the two structures are only 8.3 km apart (5.2 miles), Christopher Wilson claims the architect of S-Denis was unaware of earlier innovations at S-Martin – a claim this author finds dubious.⁵⁶ Conversely, Jean Bony identifies S-Martin as a transitional type:

⁵³ "Paris, Église Saint-Martin-des-Champs," in *Mapping Gothic*, <http://mappingGothic.org/building/1166>.

⁵⁴ Ibid, "Paris, Église Saint-Denis," <http://mappingGothic.org/building/1182>.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ "Abbot Suger's Work at St.-Denis," in *Gothic Architecture*, p.32. Christopher Wilson writes that Abbot Suger was presumably not aware that the effect of large windows ringing the chevet "had been anticipated in the choir of St.-Martin des Champs."

The new Gothic sense of spatial freedom, achieved so typically through the thinning out of all the elements of the structure, existed already at Saint-Martin-des-Champs. The choir of Saint-Denis has thus to be viewed as a second stage in a development which had already been started in another Parisian workshop a few years before. What remains now of Suger's choir at Saint-Denis is only the lower story: the ambulatory and chapels (and the crypt that carries them). Above that, instead of the 13th century superstructure, has to be imagined something very much like the long roofs and short upper story of Saint-Martin-des-Champs.⁵⁷

At first glance, the two churches are similar (fig.21-22): a rounded chevet surrounded by a double ambulatory and radiating chapels. At both churches a sequence of seven chapels, which are each illuminated by two windows, radiate from the hemicycle; this forms a wall of light and sense of permeable openness. However, at S-Denis, all chapels are almost identical, whereas at S-Martin, the middle chapel is enlarged and pulled away from the central vessel to form a separate unit – similar to the corona of Thomas Beckett at Canterbury Cathedral (fig.10). The original elevation of the chevet of S-Denis may have been similar to S-Martin (fig.8).

Support for this speculation that S-Martin preceded S-Denis might exist in the rib vaults. At S-Martin, the main vault of the hemicycle, the corona, and the two vaults between are ribbed, characteristic of Gothic. All other aisle vaults are simple groins with no ribs and plaster applied to stone. By contrast, all the aisle vaults at S-Denis are ribbed, possibly indicating that masons gradually adopted ribs, beginning with slight experimentation at S-Martin and then more confident and consistent employment at S-Denis. Masons might simply have modified and scaled up their design for S-Martin when asked to build S-Denis.

At S-Martin, there are compound columns, which emphasize height and are characteristic of later Gothic cathedrals. At S-Denis, there are monolithic columns with slight entasis (bulging in the middle), surmounted by Roman-style capitals. Such columns divide the aisles and ambulatories and may have existed in the main arcade, which was rebuilt c.1230. The compound

⁵⁷ Jean Bony, "The Choir of Saint-Denis," in *French Gothic Architecture of the 12th & 13th Centuries*, p.62.

columns of S-Martin are more common to later Gothic churches than are the Roman columns of S-Denis; S-Denis' columns are more common to the Early Christian and Carolingian churches. This unconventional mixture of precedent-based columns and nave combined with "futuristic" chevet might help situate S-Denis at a turning point.⁵⁸ The 900s Carolingian nave of S-Denis most likely had Roman columns, as Suger writes that this old basilica had a "marvelous variety of Roman columns,"⁵⁹ and the builders of the "Gothic" chevet may have chosen to maintain continuity with a co-existing and pre-Gothic past. For instance, before explaining his lengthy search for Roman columns, Suger describes his justification as follows: "In carrying out such plans my first thought was for the concordance and harmony of the ancient and the new work."⁶⁰ The fact that S-Denis synthesizes old and new also permits us to read multiple styles from a single building – part Gothic, part futuristic, and part ancient.

The floor plan of S-Martin, unlike S-Denis, exhibits significant geometric irregularities. For instance, the chevet is not a perfect half-circle, rather it is twisted and off-axis with variable distances between bays. The corona is not parallel to the axis of the nave. The three ambulatory chapels south of the corona are flatter and more compressed than those to the north. And, the central quadripartite ribbed vault between choir and corona is not a perfect rectangle. S-Denis exhibits none of these problems.

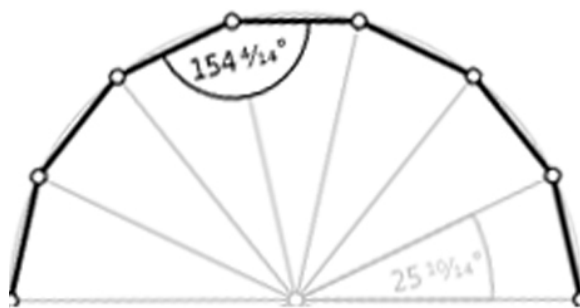
Two factors could explain these irregularities. **First**, there could have been structures east of the S-Martin chevet that hemmed it in and required builders to work between. For instance, a large structure, now demolished, may have prevented erecting the new chevet on the same axis as the nave. Builders may have cleverly tweaked their measurements to build the new structures

⁵⁸ See: W. Sauerländer, "'*Première architecture gothique*' or 'Renaissance of the Twelfth Century? Changing Perspectives in the Evaluation of Architectural History,'" *Sewanee Medieval Colloquium, Occasional Papers*, no. 2 (1985): p.25-43.

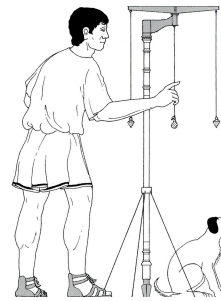
⁵⁹ "*De Consecratione*," Ch.II, p.87.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, Ch.II, p.91

without affecting the existing site. **Second**, with the primitive surveying tools of groma, string, and wooden pegs driven into the ground, medieval masons frequently made mistakes (fig.23-24).⁶¹ For instance, the entire nave of Canterbury Cathedral was accidentally erected ~3 degrees off axis from the choir – a mistake masons only noticed when construction had progressed too far to change course.⁶² Similarly, the distance between nave piers at Notre-Dame de Paris varies from bay to bay, contrary to appearances of equidistant and geometrically perfect architecture, “The interior columns don’t line up and neither do some of the aisles. Rather than removing the remains of existing structures from the site, the workers appear to have built around them.”⁶³



23. Seven-sided half-circle – difficult to survey



24. Groma and a dog named Rex⁶⁴

Support for this second hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that the chevet is structurally and geometrically the most complex part of a church. The other sections – nave, crossing, and transept – are measured out as squares and rectangles. Each bay intersects with its neighbors at right angles. Measuring instruments, like the groma, are designed for right angles, hence fewer possibilities for error. But, the rounded plan of the chevet poses measuring and construction problems to builders. It is empirically difficult for a mason to calculate a perfect

⁶¹ David Yeomans, “The Geometry of a Piece of String,” *Architectural History* 54 (2011): 23-47. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41418347>.

⁶² C.f. floor plan of Canterbury.

⁶³ Rachel Hartigan Shea, “Innovators: Historian Uses Lasers to Unlock Mysteries of Gothic Cathedrals,” in *National Geographic*, <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/06/150622-andrew-tallon-notre-dame-cathedral-laser-scan-art-history-medieval-Gothic/> (retrieved 16 November 2018).

⁶⁴ “La Groma” in *Les Arènes de Nîmes un Amphitêâtre Romaine*. <https://arenes-webdoc.nimes.fr/en/construction/build/in-all-its-splendor/a-surveyor-s-tools/the-groma/> (accessed 23 November 2018).

chevet with available tools. Both churches, but particularly S-Martin, illustrate the initial trepidation and failures masons faced when experimenting with a relatively new style.

The problematic geometry of S-Martin could strengthen the claim that medieval masons first experimented here with the complex double ambulatory, trefoil-like floor plan, and two-story elevation (arcade and clerestory), before moving on to S-Denis, where they perfected their method. The masons of both churches are unknown. But, given their stylistic similarities, same date, and walking distance between the two churches (Google Maps estimates 1:45 hours by foot),⁶⁵ it is possible construction teams of each were in contact with each other, if not cross-employed. The stones of S-Martin and S-Denis are also from the same quarry. Christopher Wilson writes: “The formal coherence of St-Martin’s double ambulatory is diminished by exceptionally many irregularities of layout and detailing, but the potential of the concept was to be fully realized a year or two later in the far more accomplished choir of St-Denis.”⁶⁶

While there is insufficient evidence to assert S-Martin as *the* first Gothic church, S-Martin’s structural complexity should cast doubt on the narrative of S-Denis. Similar analyses of contemporaneous churches to Suger’s S-Denis could be conducted for Saint-Germer-de-Fly (as William Clark has done),⁶⁷ Sens (see Kenneth Severens),⁶⁸ or Noyon (see Thomas Polk).⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Google Maps, “Walking Directions: S-Martin-des-Champs to S-Denis,” accessed 22 November 2018).

⁶⁶ “The Beginnings of Gothic,” in *Gothic Architecture*, p.31.

⁶⁷ William W. Clark, “Spatial Innovations in the Chevet of Saint-Germain-des-Prés,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 38, no. 4 (1979): 348-65, doi:10.2307/989458.

⁶⁸ Kenneth Warren Severens, “The Cathedral of Sens and Its Influence in the Twelfth Century,” PhD. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1968.

⁶⁹ Thomas K. Polk, “The early Gothic chevets of Saint-Denis and Noyon: methodological considerations,” PhD. Diss., Pennsylvania State University, 1976.

IV. The Importance of the Narrative: Reconsidered

If S-Denis is not the first Gothic church, then what is? What insight is gained by abandoning this narrative? And do historians need to construct a replacement narrative? How, when given the variety of co-existing Gothic structures of possibly earlier date, is S-Denis still considered the first? There are other candidates and other ways to construct the story of Gothic. But, the current narrative of S-Denis' importance has been unquestioningly accepted for over 150 years (Arnaud Timbert's paper has done the most to challenge this narrative). The strength of the S-Denis story might reflect several factors.

There is a paucity of information about other churches from the 1100s: who built them, and why. Abbot Suger's *De Consecratione* is equivalent to an artist's "statement of intent," describing the beauty of his creation. No other medieval church is as colorfully animated in a primary text, except Gervase's account of Canterbury Cathedral. Suger's written document is subjectively important in animating the architecture at S-Denis. Older or contemporaneous churches to S-Denis lack a powerful interlocutor, although they are as important as S-Denis in igniting the Romanesque to Gothic paradigm shift.⁷⁰

S-Denis is a culturally important in the construction of French national identity. But, it is speciously natural for architectural stories to map onto sites of cultural value, and to link this site to a Capetian origins story of the French nation. History is rich in uncertainties and chance occurrences. There are many possible candidates for the status of first *Gothic* church – S-Denis, S-Martin, S-Germer-de-Fly, Sens, Noyon,⁷¹ as well as earlier Gothic buildings now demolished. Earlier structures, such as the pointed arches of Islamic Spain and the Near East, and flying buttresses in Byzantine Constantinople, exhibited key "Gothic" features centuries before France.

⁷⁰ "Suger, Abbot of S-Denis, and the Rhetoric of Persuasion," in *Plotting Gothic*, p.77.

⁷¹ C.f. Charles Seymour and Thomas Polk's PhD dissertation attempts to place Noyon as the truly first Gothic church.

This attribution of the origins of all Gothic architecture to one church may reveal a human weakness for crafting stories out of buildings and their builders. The nature of S-Denis' design and early date – when coupled with the personality of its bishop – provides a framework for storytelling. Suger presents the story of church construction as a narrative with saints, miracles, pilgrims, and masons whose experiences play out through architecture, building toward a set end goal. This story may have appealed to 1800s thinkers like Ruskin and Pugin who popularized Gothic, both as an architectural style and as a cultural symbol for a vanished medieval heritage. However, in Suger's own words:

Chance wanders aimlessly,
Brings and brings back events; and accident rules all that is mortal.⁷²

Architectural historians need to balance the need to craft a narrative about their architect-protagonist with the recognition that some architectural truths will remain unknowable – and guided more by chance than by destiny.⁷³ In telling the story of all architecture through “keystone” structures, one forgets the small structures, demolished, and lesser-known structures along the way that prompted a gradual evolution over time of the Romanesque into the Gothic. The need to find the first is in the mind of the interlocutor. To quote Stephen Murray:

Architecture is an attempt to negate chance. To leave a testimony that is firm and leaves an agenda than no one can deny. And the tomb program of Saint Denis is designed to efface this idea of chance – presenting a smooth transition from monarchs and ignoring the conflicts and randomness between eras.⁷⁴

⁷² “*De Consecratione*,” Ch.V, p.109. Suger quotes from Lucanus’ *Pharsalia*.

⁷³ This was the objective of *Mapping Gothic* by Stephen Murray, Andrew Tallon, et al.

⁷⁴ Stephen Murray (Lisa & Bernard Selz Professor of Medieval History, emeritus), interviewed by Myles Zhang at Columbia University, November 14, 2018.

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Appendix: Illustrative Quotations on Saint-Denis

Copied below are a few quotes from sources – ranging from popular to academic – describing S-Denis’ key importance in architectural history, and Suger to be the man behind this project. I find these assertions about S-Denis to be particularly prevalent in popular guidebooks about the church, and even on this church’s official website. All links below were last accessed on 2 May 2019.

This list is by no means comprehensive. Instead it is illustrative of a widely accepted – but problematic – architectural narrative.

* * *

2018: “*La naissance de l’art gothique. Conçue par l’abbé Suger, conseiller des rois, de 1135 à 1144, achevée au XIII^e siècle sous le règne de Saint Louis, œuvre majeur de l’art gothique, l’église inaugure la place centrale de la lumière, symbole du divin, dans l’architecture religieuse.*”

Translation: “The birth of Gothic art. The church, designed by Abbot Suger, kings’ advisor from 1135 to 1144, was completed in the 13th century during the reign of Saint Louis. A major work of Gothic art, **this church was the first to place a great importance on light**, a symbol of divinity, in religious architecture.”

- From S-Denis’ official website, written by the *Centre des Monuments Nationaux*
<http://www.saint-denis-basilique.fr/en>

2017: “The present church of St-Denis was commenced by him about 1140 and marks **the beginning of the Gothic tendency in architecture** and its transition from the Romanesque style.”

- From the *New Advent, Catholic Encyclopedia*,
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13343b.htm>

2013: “The basilica, formerly the church of a Benedictine abbey, is considered to be **the birthplace of Gothic architecture** for it was there that Abbot Suger introduced a new spatial order for the rebuilding of the church’s choir in the beginning of the 12th century. In Saint-Denis, Suger and his architect united the features of Norman architecture (rib vaults) to those of Burgundian style (pointed arches), hence giving birth to Gothic architecture style.”

- From the website *French Monuments*, <https://frenchmoments.eu/saint-denis-basilica/>

2012: “Here we are at the basilica of Saint-Denis, the **birthplace of the Gothic**, thanks to Suger who was the abbot in the first half of the twelfth century.”

- Kahn Academy, “Birth of the Gothic: Abbot Suger and the ambulatory at St. Denis”
<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/medieval-world/gothic1/v/birth-of-the-gothic-abbot-suger-and-the-ambulatory-in-the-basilica-of-st-denis-1140-44>

2002: “In the 12th century the Abbot Suger rebuilt portions of the abbey church using innovative structural and decorative features. **In doing so, he is said to have created the first truly Gothic building.** The basilica's 13th-century nave is the prototype for the Rayonnant Gothic style, and provided an architectural model for many medieval cathedrals and abbeys of northern France, Germany, England and a great many other countries.”

- From S-Denis' *Wikipedia* page: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basilica_of_Saint-Denis

1998: “Suger, (born 1081, near Paris—died Jan. 13, 1151), French abbot and adviser to kings Louis VI and VII whose supervision of the rebuilding of the abbey church of **Saint-Denis was instrumental in the development of the Gothic style of architecture....** It is believed that he was the inspiration behind many of the architectural innovations employed in the project, which, as one of the earliest Gothic buildings, included an original use of the pointed (rather than round) arch and the ribbed vault and extensive use of stained glass, including a rose window in the facade.”

- From *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Suger>

1996: “*La cathédrale de Saint-Denis, autrefois basilique royale de Saint-Denis, occupe une place exceptionnelle dans l'histoire de l'architecture gothique, chacune des grandes étapes de sa construction constituant une révolution artistique et technique.... L'emploi de la voûte sur croisée d'ogives, l'importance de la surface vitrée caractérisent la première campagne de construction et font de Saint-Denis un chef de file des églises gothiques.*”

Translation: The cathedral of Saint-Denis, once the royal basilica of Saint-Denis, occupies an exceptional place in the history of Gothic architecture, each of the major stages of its construction constituting an artistic and technical revolution.... The use of the rib vault and the importance of the glazed surface characterize the first construction campaign and make Saint-Denis **a leader in Gothic churches.**

- From the UNESCO designation report justifying why this building should be included as site of world heritage <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/230/>

1995: “The abbey church of Saint-Denis has enjoyed a position of prominence in medieval studies. Since Emile Male's turn-of-the-century work, claiming the abbey as central to subsequent Gothic stylistic and iconographic development, it has been perceived as a seminal monument. The rare existence of a textual record by the building's patron, Abbot Suger (1122-1151), and the abbey's links to the concomitant rise of the Capetian monarchy increase its scholarly interest. **It has been traditionally regarded as a 'key' monument in assessing Gothic.**”

- From Eric Fernie, “Suger's ‘Completion’ of Saint-Denis,” in *Artistic Integration Gothic Buildings*

1993: “The opening up of the wall for stained glass windows **was first achieved** in the new abbey church at Saint-Denis, begun by Abbot Suger about 1135.”

- From Leland M. Roth, “Gothic Architecture,” in *Understanding Architecture*, p.294.

1990: “The significance of Saint-Denis as **the first building of the Early Gothic style** was first recognized in 1860 by Dallaway and in 1890 by Whittington, then again in 1843 by Franz Mertens, and independently at the same time by Kugler and Schnasse....It is the façade of Saint-Denis that **marks the beginning of a new epoch.**”

- From Paul Frankl and Paul Crossley, “The Transition,” in *Gothic Architecture*, p.61.

1990: In describing S-Denis, Wilson questions the idea that the Gothic style evolved gradually over a series of buildings:

“If the dating evidence were not so secure, it is unlikely that any responsible scholar would ever have assigned it to the early 1140s on the basis of its style. The fact that the choir remained a modern building throughout the late 12th century makes it difficult to accept the widely held view of the development of Early Gothic architecture as a process of gradual and continuous evolution giving rise to new concepts at a uniform rate.

- Christopher Wilson, “Abbot Suger’s Work at St-Denis,” in *The Gothic Cathedral*, p. 43.

1990: *Suger, abbé de la plus importante de toutes les abbayes royales, celle de Saint-Denis, et commanditaire de la partie occidentale et du sanctuaire de l’église abbatiale, œuvres considérées à juste titre comme un événement marquant dans l’histoire de la naissance de l’architecture gothique, nous a laissé un compte rendu détaillé de son activité comme abbé.*

Translation: Suger, abbot **of the most important of all the royal abbeys**, that of Saint-Denis, and sponsor of the western part and the sanctuary of the abbey church, works considered rightly as **a milestone in the history of the birth of Gothic architecture**, left us a detailed account of his activity as abbot.

- From Dieter Kimpel and Robert Suckdale, “*Les Débuts du Gothique*,”
- in *L’Architecture Gothique en France*, p.65

1981: Describing the philosophy of Dionysius of Areopagite as applied to the internal lighting of S-Denis, Duby writes:

“This concept held the key to the new art [of Gothic] – an art of light, clarity, and dazzling radiance. This was to be the art of France, and Suger’s abbey church was its prototype.”

- From Georges Duby, “God is Light,” in *The Age of Gothic Cathedrals*, p.100.

1970: “A discussion of the art of the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century quite naturally begins with a study of the western portals of Saint-Denis. Dedicated on June 9, 1140, **these portals are the first in the series of ‘royal portals’ that define Early Gothic sculpture**. Since **they are pivotal in the change from Romanesque to Gothic art**, one might think that the basic problems concerning the decoration of the doorways would have been solved, making further discussion unnecessary.”

- From Sumner McK. Crosby, “The West Portals of Saint-Denis and the Saint-Denis Style,” *Gesta* 9, no. 2, p.1.

1944: “The texts reprinted and translated in this volume have long been familiar to every student of medieval art and civilization. They are concerned with what still deserves to be called **the parent monument of all Gothic cathedrals**.”

- From Erwin Panofsky’s first preface to his translation of Suger, in *Abbot Suger on the Abbey of St.-Denis and its art treasures*, p.xi.