

Suger

THE DEEDS OF
LOUIS THE FAT

Translated with Introduction
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The Catholic University of America Press
Washington, D.C.

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Introduction



Suger, abbot of St. Denis, has won a lasting place in European history as the man responsible for the rebuilding of the great abbey church of St. Denis, a reconstruction crucial in the transition from Romanesque to Gothic architecture.¹ But at the very time that work was proceeding on the great abbey (portions of which were completed in 1140 and 1144) Suger employed himself as well in writing a notable account of the deeds of King Louis VI (1108–37). The work has an evident value, for Louis's reign has been seen as marking a turning point in the fortunes of French monarchy, beginning a trend of augmented royal power that culminated in the monarchy of Louis XIV.² But Suger's work has an interest quite apart from its being an important account of the deeds of a significant king. Like Einhard, who had written his life of Charlemagne some three centuries earlier, Suger was a man of literary bent. Both were enthusiastic about their subject, and each produced a work that is a prime source of information about that person, but there remains an important difference between the historians. Einhard closely followed a classical prototype, Suetonius, and readers of his work often find his own thought elusive, submerged beneath the figure of the ancient author. Suger, however, although subjected to various influences, lacked a model. Doubtless his work is more confused and less subtle than Einhard's, but to this degree it also reveals more about its author. The careful reader of Suger's text feels that he knows not only the deeds of Louis but the ideas of its writer as well.

Little is known of the early life of Suger, who was born in 1080, or perhaps 1081. He described himself as having been of humble birth, as does his friend and biographer William; but modern work has suggested that members of his family were

knights, and it may be that he came from a moderately well-to-do family. At the age of ten Suger was placed, presumably by his parents, as an oblate in the abbey of St. Denis, a few miles north of Paris.³

One of the wealthiest in France and a burial place of royalty, the abbey of St. Denis owed much of its status to a curious process whereby three different individuals had come to be seen as one man. According to the Bible, St. Paul numbered among his Athenian converts one Dionysius (French *Denis*) the Areopagite (Acts 17:34). Then, in the third century, another Dionysius, who seems to have been bishop of Paris, was martyred. It was later believed that Clement, one of the early popes, had sent this Dionysius to preach the gospel in Gaul, and by Suger's time an identification between him and Dionysius the Areopagite, which had been proposed in the ninth century by the abbot and translator Hilduin, was generally accepted. Meanwhile, in about A.D. 500, an eastern author of texts on such themes as the unknowability of God and the hierarchy of the angels affixed the name of Dionysius the Areopagite to his work, a misattribution that deceived most people until modern times. So, when Suger and his fellow monks contemplated the patron saint of their abbey, they saw him as a particularly impressive figure: a man in contact with St. Paul who had become the author of important theological work in his own right, who had been sent as a missionary to Gaul by a pope, and who had closed his life in glorious martyrdom. In addition, the abbey had been benefiting from royal generosity since the Merovingian period, with various Merovingian, Carolingian, and Capetian sovereigns having been buried there, so that by the twelfth century many people felt that the blessed Dionysius was in some way the patron saint of France, and that the abbey had special ties with French royalty.⁴ Thus, when Peter Abeldard denied the claim of the monks that their patron was the Areopagite, they said that he was a "traitor to the whole country", those who sacked the abbey during the

French revolution similarly identified it with the French *regnum*.⁵

The young Suger seems to have been happy there, and as a man in his sixties he looked back on the monastery as having been a mother to him. He eagerly read the old charters, which documented the rights of the monastery to various possessions. He maintained this early interest throughout his life, and his rise within the community was quick.⁶ Having completed his studies, he went with Abbot Adam of St. Denis to a council presided over by Pope Paschal II at Poitiers in 1106; in the following year he argued the claims of his monastery against the bishop of Paris before the pope; on a later occasion, he again accompanied Adam to discussions being held between Paschal and representatives of the emperor Henry V. He became provost of a dependency of St. Denis at Berneval in Normandy, and in 1109 provost of Toury.⁷ We gain the picture of a scholarly monk who enjoyed the confidence of his abbot, who was coming to move in high circles, and who was rapidly gaining administrative experience.

Suger tells us that the church of St. Denis solemnly set him "among the princes of the kingdom and the church," and from an early age he must have been an associate of his contemporary, Prince Louis, who was educated at the abbey.⁸ Despite being the eldest son of King Philip I (1060-1108), Louis's path to the throne was not entirely straightforward. His father, Philip, dismissed his mother, Bertha of Holland, while Louis was still a young boy, and began a liaison with Bertada of Montfort, the wife of Count Fulk IV of Anjou, from which union were born two sons, Philip and Florus. Tension about the succession was inevitable, and Suger alludes to it in general terms. But at some time during the years 1098-1100, Louis became associated with Philip on the throne with the title "king-designate", and in 1108, following his father's death, Louis went in haste to gain the crown in a ceremony at Orléans.⁹ Louis and Suger enjoyed a

developing relationship, documented in the pages of the *Deeds*. As early as 1104 we find Suger in Louis's company; Suger overheard Philip give advice to Louis about the castle of Monthéry, just as in 1112 Suger was present at an important discussion between Louis and Hugh of Le Puiset, one of the barons of the royal principality. In 1118 and again in 1122 he travelled on Louis's behalf to meet popes. While returning from Rome on the second of these occasions he learned of Abbot Adam's death and his own election as abbot. Louis was irate because of a lapse in procedure, for the electors had failed to request the *licitia eligendi*, and the importance of St. Denis made the election of its abbot a political question. Any animosity, however, was short-lived, for Louis quickly accepted the election and confirmed the monastery's privileges, leaving Suger in the office he held until his death (January 13, 1151) and free for another trip to Italy.¹⁰ The relationship between the two men had reached a new plateau.

As abbot of St. Denis, Suger found himself even more involved in high affairs of state. He was present in 1124 when Louis, his kingdom threatened by a planned German attack, came to St. Denis to seek the assistance of the kingdom's patron saints, the blessed Dionysius and his companions, and a document issued by Louis on that occasion refers to Suger as a man familiar and faithful in his councils.¹¹ Indeed, Suger travelled to Reims where the French awaited the Germans, and the successful outcome of this fracas can only have strengthened the ties between Suger and the king, for many believed that the blessed Dionysius had played an important role in the results. And a later series of events, known to us only in outline, must have had a similar benefit for Suger. For some time Stephen of Garlande had been building up his power until he became seneschal and chancellor; but in 1127 he lost his position and left court. His departure created a power vacuum, a situation from which the abbot of St. Denis profited, for the witness lists to charters issued by Louis

indicate that during the late years of Louis's reign, Suger could frequently be found in the king's circle. With precise reference to 1129, the *Chronicle of Morigny* states that Suger was then a man outstanding in the king's court and an excellent pleader of causes.¹²

Suger's book, *The Deeds of Louis the Fat*, allows his close involvement in other important affairs of state toward the end of Louis's reign to be followed. Louis sent him to greet Pope Innocent II at Cluny in 1130; the *intimi et familiares* who advised the king to have his second son, Louis, anointed and crowned following the death in 1131 of the elder son, Philip, included Suger among them; and the king sent him as a *familiaris* in the party he dispatched to Aquitaine in 1137 to fetch Eleanor, who had been entrusted to the royal care by her dying father, Duke William X.¹³ His absence from court on this occasion caused Suger to miss the death and burial of the man whom he later described as "our dearest friend and lord."¹⁴ The younger Louis experienced a smooth accession to the throne; but some individuals who had played a leading role during his father's reign, such as his mother, Adelaide of Maurienne, and his cousin Ralph, count of Vermandois, found their influence at least temporarily in eclipse. So too Suger, for he apparently withdrew from court in 1139 and became less involved in royal activities. He later returned and, as the dominant figure in the regency during Louis VII's participation in the Second Crusade, enjoyed more power than he had had before. But during the interval Suger retired somewhat from affairs of state, and gave his attention to rebuilding the abbey of St. Denis and composing his account of the deeds of his friend and lord.¹⁵

What kind of book did Suger see himself as writing? As far as we know he did not give his work a title, and the manuscripts that preserve the text bestow several names on it. But in his prelatory letter to Bishop Josselin of Soissons, Suger states that he is forwarding for his friend's comments "the deeds (*gesta*) of

Louis, the most serene king of the French," just as he elsewhere refers to his account of "the deeds of the aforesaid king."¹⁶ Similarly, Suger's successor as abbot of St. Denis, Odo, referred to him as having written the deeds of Louis; and his biographer, William, refers on three occasions to Suger's account of Louis's deeds.¹⁷ We see no reason to dispute the description of the work provided by both Suger and his contemporaries; and so we have not followed Henri Waquet, who published his edition and translation under the title *Vie de Louis VI le gros*. We believe that Suger sought to compose not a life of Louis but an account of his deeds.¹⁸

It may be worth going into some detail at this point. Portions of the *Deeds*, those that describe the last illness, death and burial of King Louis and that may owe something to the influence of traditional hagiography, have come down to us in a separate manuscript; it seems possible to identify them with a series of lessons which Suger is known to have composed for the liturgical office at St. Denis on the anniversary of Louis's death.¹⁹ Two of Suger's editors have suggested that these lessons are extracts from the *Deeds*, but it may well be that, on the contrary, the *Deeds* represent an expansion of the lessons. We know that as early as 1124 Suger was providing for Louis's anniversary to be celebrated at St. Denis, and that a passage of the *Chronicle of Morigny* that refers to Suger's having composed lessons was written during the period 1139–42. A passage in the *Deeds*, however, implies that its author wrote it after the death of Pope Innocent II in 1143, and the earliest reference to the *Deeds* occurs shortly after that date. Perhaps, then, Suger worked up his book from the lessons, but as it turned out, the work described not Louis's life as much as his deeds, particularly those of battle. Once this is understood it becomes easier to locate the *Deeds* in its proper genre.²⁰

Suger's *The Deeds of Louis the Fat* can be set beside such writings of eleventh- and twelfth-century provenance as Wipo's

The Deeds of the Emperor Conrad, William of Poitiers's *The Deeds of William the Conqueror*, William of Apulia's *The Deeds of Robert Guiscard*, the anonymous English *The Deeds of Stephen*, and *The Deeds of Frederick Barbarossa* of Otto of Freising. In works of this kind the narrating of deeds takes precedence over the provision of biographical data. It is even tempting to compare Suger's book with writings on the First Crusade that contain the word *Gesta* in their titles, and at a further remove perhaps with the Old French *chansons de geste* as well. This is not to suggest that Suger played any part in the creation of the Old French literature that has come down to us.²¹ But he was a lover of stories. We know Suger could relate the deeds of any king or prince of the Franks who might be named, and when he was in a very good mood he loved to stay up to the middle of the night telling of the deeds of heroic men.²² Louis was one of the brave men whose deeds Suger enjoyed recounting, and it may be suggested that the curiously episodic character of the book he produced owes something to the technique of a raconteur.

But it would be wrong to see Suger's *Deeds* as merely a collection of incidents chronologically arranged, for an analysis of the individual chapters reveals an internal structure.²³ We frequently find that quarrels, disputes, disturbances, or attacks have upset a peaceful order. These violent acts can be small in scale—especially those done by the petty barons of the Ile-de-France—or large, such as the invasion of France that Emperor Henry V planned, they may be directed against either lay people or churches. The innocent parties come before Louis to seek his help, often casting themselves at his feet.²⁴ Louis hastens to put matters straight; his proud opponents learn to their cost that, in one of Suger's favorite expressions, they have been "deceived by a vain hope," and the peace that had earlier prevailed is restored or improved upon. Read in this way, the *Deeds* reveal a definite structure. Its chapters are more or less autonomous units, laid out in a sequence whose movement is reiterative rather than

ideal of
king's war
of peace

strictly linear.²⁵ They constitute the building blocks of a text not as disordered as it may first appear. It is simply structured on principles foreign to our notion of historical writing.

Suger concerned himself, then, with recounting the deeds of Louis rather than presenting a biography of him. With this in mind, the reader may readily accept his leaving out details that an author of a modern biography would have included. One would never know from reading Suger that Louis received his knighthood away from home following an apparent falling-out with his father, that he was present at the court of his future enemy Henry I of England in 1100, or that his stepmother, Bertrada, asked Henry to hold Louis in perpetual confinement and thereafter tried to poison him, as other contemporaries of Suger reported.²⁶ There is only a fleeting reference to Louis's marriage to Adelaide of Maurienne, and Philip, his eldest son by the marriage, is introduced only to die. Similarly, Suger has little to say concerning what some scholars would regard as the most important features of Louis's reign, such as his activities in bestowing charters and building castles. The growing importance of St. Bernard and the currents of ecclesiastical opinion he represented are likewise ignored.²⁷ Indeed, Suger recorded only a few grudging words about the house of St. Victor in Paris, which Louis himself founded and which became prominent in twelfth-century spiritual and intellectual life; he is suspiciously silent about Louis's involvement with any religious house other than St. Denis.²⁸ The Louis described by Suger was a man of deeds, and it will be worth our while to ask why Suger found him so attractive.

Suger emerges from his book as a staunch royalist, perhaps not surprisingly, in view of his enthusiasm for the writings of pseudo-Dionysius. He had no difficulty in seeing French society in hierarchical terms, with the monarchy at the top.²⁹ It was a view that provided a theoretical model for a strong monarchy,

but, as can easily be seen from the *Deeds*, Louis VI was not a particularly powerful king, for his interests were largely concentrated in the area around Paris, the Ile-de-France. Here was located the royal demesne, or domain—the cluster of lands and rights that the king himself held—and the somewhat wider block of territory termed the royal principality where the king's direct rule prevailed. Even in his own domain, however, the position of the king was not strong; a story later told in England depicted the young Louis unable to proceed three miles beyond Paris without the permission and safe-conduct of the neighboring princes.³⁰

Distinguished work done by French scholars since World War II has drawn attention to a widespread breakdown in authority in France around the year 1000. Power passed from major feudatories and the holders of public power to those who held castles and were able to gather bands of knights around themselves, so that early twelfth-century France was "less an age of fiefs than an age of castles."³¹ Just as Henry I of England, in his capacity as duke of Normandy, devoted himself to the towers and castles of that area, so Louis turned his attention to settling affairs and reducing the power of the greater and lesser castellans of the Ile-de-France. From the pages of the *Deeds* one gains the picture of a monarch continually marshalling his forces for action throughout his principality, from the Norman frontier to the lower Marne valley to the region of Orléans. Indeed, as seen by Suger, a chief task of the king was to impose his will on the turbulent barons around Paris and thereby keep peace for the churches and villagers of his lands.

But Suger's Louis does more, for on several occasions he intervenes directly in districts outside the royal principality. Since "a king's power should never be thought of as being limited only to the narrow boundaries of any part of his lands," Louis led a large host south of the Loire into Berry in 1109 in answer to a plea of a lack of justice.³² He subdued the fortress of Germigny,

brought its holder, Haimo II, lord of Bourbon, back into the Ile-de-France for trial, and kept the castle for his own disposition. In 1122 and once more in 1126 the king led major expeditions into the Auvergne in response to petitions for help from the bishop of Clermont-Ferrand against Count William VI. In restoring peace to the land and the churches, Louis accepted fealty, a sworn oath, and a sufficient number of hostages from Duke William X of Aquitaine, who had interceded on behalf of his vassal the count. The duke rebuked the king for his direct interference, but he guaranteed that all concerned would settle these affairs at Orléans within the royal principality. Then, in one of his most dramatic efforts the king eagerly entered Flanders in 1127 burning with a desire to avenge the foul murder of a kinsman, Count Charles; he is represented as having accomplished the vengeance fairly easily.³³ He installed a new count, helped capture the conspirators, and saw them condemned to a demeaning death after he had taken possession of the castle of Ypres. Suger describes every one of these interventions of the king of France as the lawful action of a monarch rightly concerned with dispensing justice throughout the realm, something that he felt had not been done during the previous reign.

In various passages of the *Deeds* Suger mentions Louis's father, Philip I, and he makes it clear that he had very little time for this king. Philip emerges as an adulterer who neglected his kingdom for a woman, and a man who sensibly decides to be buried away from other kings. His most striking characteristic is indolence, for even during Philip's lifetime Louis was the "defender of his father's kingdom", and according to Suger, the interest the son took in the welfare of those who prayed, those who worked, and the poor was something to which they had not been accustomed for a long time. Significantly, people are described as having complained to Philip a hundred times about Ebles of Roucy, whereas only two or three complaints brought action from Louis. Suger found this idleness in Philip easy to

explain, for after he took up with Berrada he gave himself up to lust, lost interest in affairs of state, and became utterly self-indulgent. Although the *Chronicle of Morigny* describes Philip as a "man of wisdom," there may be some truth in the account of Suger, the emphasis of which is similar to that of William of Malmesbury.³⁴

But what a contrast with Louis! As early as chapter 3, Hugh of Clermont hastens to him to seek justice over the wrongful loss of a castle. Louis quickly sets the legal process into motion, and when it fails he rushes to take vengeance. In the following chapter his forces flee, whereupon the young lord leaps on his horse and hastens after them. The Louis of Suger lives in a world of constant motion, and the narrative of his deeds is full of verbs and adverbs of speed. Doubtless the king slowed down toward the end, but his pattern of robust activity remains. In the final chapters of his book, within the space of a few pages, Suger sums up the conclusion of several of Louis's expeditions with a neat phrase he may have borrowed from Ovid: "He returned home a victor."³⁵ And even as his strength failed him, Louis continued to fight against the king of England, Count Theobald, and all his enemies. The contrast with his father Philip could hardly be more plain.

What was the attraction of this busy king for the author of the *Deeds*? We are in a good position to say, for toward the end of his life Suger, aware that his death was approaching, wrote a letter to the king's son and successor, Louis VII, in which he made it clear what he felt the younger Louis should be doing:

With due care I entreat Your Nobility on behalf of the noble church of St. Denis, which is the greatest part of the kingdom and your crown, that in all things, among all things, and before all things you foster and support it, as is proper for a good and pious lord, and that you extend to it the hand of counsel and aid. The loftiness of Your Majesty will recall the way in which, as a young man, you departed from your land, placed the noble

kingdom of the French in the hand of the church of God and, after many dangers and the deaths of many people, you visited the eastern church. Look out, and think carefully, so that you do not lose the fruit of such a great effort! Love the church of God, defend orphans and widows, and in this way you will be able to resist every power, spiritual and worldly, and, God being your helper, the plots of however many enemies you may have. This is my counsel.³⁶

A healthy respect for the abbey of St. Denis and a concern for the churches, orphans, and widows were the qualities that Suger deemed desirable in the younger Louis, and his father Louis VI, at least in the story the abbot chose to tell, had displayed them both to a high degree.

The centrality of the abbey of St. Denis and its traditions in the life of Suger is difficult for us to understand. But monks of the middle ages felt such loyalty toward their houses, which they so often entered in boyhood, that they were willing to accept traditions for them on the basis of what we would consider very slender evidence. Guibert of Nogent, for example, in other respects a good historian, believed that the church of Nogent, which later developed into a monastery, was founded by a king of Britain who had spoken with St. Peter, the other apostles, and the Virgin Mary in Jerusalem shortly after the Ascension of Jesus Christ.³⁷ Similarly, Suger believed that Dionysius, the martyred bishop over whose relics the monastery of St. Denis had been built, was none other than Dionysius the Areopagite, who had been converted to Christianity by St. Paul. Suger became passionately devoted to this patron, and as we have seen, he applied himself to rebuilding the great abbey church at the very time he was raising to Louis his "monument more lasting than bronze," the *Deeds*, in the prologue of which he describes himself as "abbot of blessed Dionysius the Areopagite."³⁸

But Suger was in no position to be exultant. To the east, the church of Reims was promoting the cult of St. Remigius, a rival to that of Dionysius; and in 1090 the young prince Louis had

subscribed to a document issued by his father that confirmed the possessions and immunities of the competing saint's house in that city. In addition, the claim that Dionysius the Areopagite was the patron of the abbey of St. Denis had recently been challenged by Peter Abeldard.³⁹ And the attitude of King Philip had given Suger no cause for satisfaction, for he had chosen to be buried at the abbey of St. Benedict on the Loire river. It has been suggested that Suger's chagrin even led him, shortly after Philip's death, to draft a document that established at St. Denis a solemn commemoration of the death of King Dagobert, who significantly had not only chosen to be buried at St. Denis but had been a good friend of that church.⁴⁰ King Louis, on the other hand, had behaved well; this is made particularly clear in the passages Suger originally wrote for the liturgical commemoration of him. They describe Louis as a close friend of the church from boyhood, explain that his response to serious ailment was the generous disbursement of treasure, much of it to St. Denis, and show him riding to the abbey church despite being morally ill. More than once in the text of the *Deeds*, Suger states that Louis conducted himself at St. Denis "with great humility." His response to a threatened German invasion in 1124 partly took the form of hastening to St. Denis, asking the blessed Dionysius for help, and taking from the altar a battle standard in a ceremony that, as depicted by Suger, implied that Louis was the vassal of the abbey. Then, when the threat of the invasion had ended, Louis returned to St. Denis to give thanks for the protection of the kingdom. Suger's description of these events is open to question in several respects, but behind the embellishment one can nevertheless detect a king who was devoted to St. Denis.

Louis's devotion to St. Denis was not his only characteristic to receive Suger's approbation. A circular letter written on the occasion of the abbot's death mentions his task of bringing before the king the pleas of the churches and the requests of widows, orphans, and the poor.⁴¹ With minor variants, Louis's

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care for the churches and the unfortunate runs like a leitmotiv throughout the *Deeds*. In the lessons composed for the liturgical commemoration of Louis at St. Denis, Suger linked the account of Louis's youth with the description of his final illness, death, and burial by a few words summing up two characteristics of his thirty-year administration: "A splendid defense of the churches and a continual oversight of the poor and orphans."⁴² The theme is reiterated, in an understated way, in the first paragraph of chapter 2; then it makes a notable appearance at the end of the book when, among the things the dying Louis urges on his son and successor, the first is care for the church of God, the poor, and orphans, which had been a royal duty for several centuries.

Louis's concern for the welfare of churches seems to be a main motive, according to Suger, behind many of the king's actions. The author of the *Deeds* persistently describes the royal intervention on behalf of churches being troubled by lay magnates: the church of Reims by Ebles of Roucy, that of Orléans by Leo of Meung, and that of Clermont-Ferrand by the count of the Auvergne. The depredations of Hugh of Le Puiset led to the formation of a formidable ecclesiastical coalition against him, which included among its members the archbishop of Sens, the bishops of Orléans and Chartres, and Suger himself. The most evil character in Suger's gallery of scoundrels, Thomas of Marle, is described as having owed his successes to the devil, one of the most powerful passages of the book shows him dying without communion. Suger makes it perfectly clear that Louis's two campaigns against him were fought at the behest of churches. In his encomium of King Robert, written around 1033, Helgaud represented this king as being bid farewell by "the monks, the clerks, the widows, the orphans and all Christ's poor."⁴³ Suger's thought is in the same tradition, which indeed had been expressed by authors writing long before Helgaud, for him a good king will intervene on behalf of churches (a term which includes their estates), both episcopal and monastic.

Moreover, Suger generally, although not always, describes

Louis's interventions as being on behalf of churches rather than "the church." Students of the middle ages are frequently taught to interpret the events of the period in terms of a battle between the two amorphous abstractions of Church and State, but such a schema, while it may have some limited pedagogical value, scarcely does justice to the complex reality. It ignores the subtleties of belief, interest, and often family relationship that bound together the holders of power in both "church" and "state," and tends to gloss over tensions between the representatives of the various groups within the church, as between bishops and abbots. More importantly, the characteristics that made wealthy churches favorite targets for Vikings in the ninth and tenth centuries made the Hughs and Thomases of the eleventh and twelfth cast envious eyes on them as well. The old French epic cycle of poems concerning William, count of Orange, has as a chief theme the weakness of monarchy, and at one stage the hero states:

I saw the whole country full of demons who were burning cities, desecrating churches, destroying chapels, overturning belfries, and twisting the breasts of noble women so that I felt great pity for them in my heart and wept bitterly. And there I swore to the Glorious One in Heaven and St. Giles, to whom I had just been praying, that I would go and help the people in that land with as many men as I could have under my command.⁴⁴

Small wonder that Peter the Venerable, the abbot of Cluny, complained more than once in his correspondence, whether metaphorically or not, that his abbey was located in an area "without a king and without a prince."⁴⁵ Twelfth-century ecclesiastics were frequently grateful for whatever security a strong rule could offer, and in this regard Suger felt that Louis had behaved admirably.

Suger's fellow monk and biographer William favorably compared his abbot's writing style with the masterful prose of Ci-

cero, but modern scholars have been less kind, and Waquet's charge that he was totally lacking in taste may stand as representative of their opinions.⁴⁶ Suger's wording is awkward and continually creates difficulties for those who would translate him. We have occasionally had to content ourselves with giving the apparent meaning of passages rather than a translation in the strict sense, when we have consulted the French version that accompanies Waquet's edition, we have found ourselves not alone in this policy. The moralizing observations with which numerous chapters commence and the descriptions of places, in particular, are often labored. Furthermore, Suger was a lover of repetition.⁴⁷ In the hands of a master like St. Bernard this trait can be impressive, but the reader of our author is more likely to find it irritating, and we have not always sought to bring it out in our translation. There are problems even with the vocabulary, for the work is packed with words used with unusual meanings.⁴⁸ Variant readings in the manuscript tradition indicate not so much carelessness on the part of scribes as intelligent and, one sometimes suspects, desperate efforts to make sense out of passages. Suger's translators are frequently tempted to conclude that their author was simply not in control of his language. In addition, as the most casual perusal of the *Deeds* shows, his style abounds in needless repetitions and apparently indiscriminate use of superlatives. But just when the temptation to despair is strongest, the reader comes upon a witty turn of phrase or pun that alerts one to the fact that, at least sometimes, Suger knew very well what he was doing. Rather surprisingly, the abbot emerges from his work as an author with classical tastes. In addition to numerous quotations from and allusions to Lucan and other classical authors, which occur frequently in passages describing war, there are references to Hector and the giants, and Hercules and his pillars, and a comparison of Louis with "a powerful wrestler and admirable gladiator."⁴⁹ Yet, our author is medieval at heart. For example, he consistently terms the city of

Louis's residence *Parisius*. The authors of the *Chronicle of Moigny* do the same, but in their work the term is glossed with its classical equivalent, *Lutecia*, on its first occurrence.⁵⁰

To say that Suger would have failed to win first prize for classical Latin prose does not imply any lack of subtlety in his method of presenting historical material. His approach can best be understood from his ideas about beauty. Suger lavished care and money on the rebuilding and decoration of the church of St. Denis at a time when powerful currents in western monastic thought, represented by such divergent figures as St. Bernard and Peter Abelard, were noted for insisting on the need for simplicity. Against his critics, Suger held that beauty had a function in heightening Christian experience:

When—out of my delight at the beauty of the house of God—the loveliness of the many-colored gems has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has caused me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred virtues: then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which exists neither entirely in the slime of earth nor entirely in the purity of heaven; and that, by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner.⁵¹

Suger can be seen as a particularly strong advocate of a way of looking at reality that strongly colored the period we now know as the middle ages: "Things that are signified give more pleasure than that which signifies them," and so, in a famous formulation, Suger states that the teaching of Christ reveals what Moses veils.⁵² He would certainly have agreed with Peter the Venerable that, while dreams were often vain, not all of them were to be despised, since the accomplishment of what they signified showed that they were often true, as twice in the *Deeds* significant dreams occur just before important changes in the dreamers' lives.⁵³ Similarly, Suger points out that the consecration of the future King Louis VII by Pope Innocent at a council

attended by many important prelates presaged a growth in royal power, and he is sympathetic to an interpretation of the slaying of William Rufus, which he emphasizes was an accident humanly speaking, as being an incident that allowed the vengeance of God to be divined. His world is full of things that point to realities greater than themselves, and it is easy to understand his devoting several pages of the *Deeds* to the alleged prophecy of Merlin.

When a man of this bent turned his attention to writing an account of the deeds of a king, his purpose was not merely to explain how things had happened. He was naturally alive to readings of events that transcended the events themselves; for as he mentioned in another work, "The setting down of things past is the showing forth of things to come."⁵⁴ In addition, as the notes to the following text show, Suger's description of Louis's ventures continually tries to put the best face on things. Louis was by no means an outstanding king; but as has well been said in a slightly different connection, Suger waved his wand over small beer and turned it into champagne.⁵⁵ In another of his writings, Suger uses a striking phrase in connection with problems that arose in the construction of the new abbey church: "Because we could not do what we wanted we settled for wanting to do what we could."⁵⁶ One has the feeling that, similarly, compromise underlay much of Louis's activity, and that Suger's portrait of him as a strong and victorious king is the product of some tailoring of his material. But Suger, the custodian of the burial places of many French kings and the abbot of a house with monarhist traditions, looked beyond the trivia that characterized so much of Louis's tenure of office and perceived a *rex Francorum* in the tradition of Charlemagne, Louis the Pious, and Charles the Bald.⁵⁷ Just as the accoutrements of the church of St. Denis could lead people toward God, so the small change of Louis's wars against the troublemakers of the Ile-de-France reveals what monarchy really is. For example, Suger's descrip-

tion of a drawn out and ultimately inconclusive struggle with Thomas of Marle begins with reflections on the office of kingship and concludes, with the help of a text from St. Paul, by explaining that Louis had indeed been fulfilling that office. However minor and banal, Louis's deeds point beyond themselves to a concept of French and Christian monarchy.

Suger's text of the *Deeds of Louis the Fat*, then, allows the careful reader an opportunity to discern the author's ideas and values. However, although certain themes and emphases develop as the events unfold, the man himself remains elusive, as one senses he did for his contemporaries. After Suger died in 1151, the monk William wrote his biography, in which he sought the intercession of his departed abbot. But although William believed that Suger was still praying, significantly he did not deduce this from Suger's character; rather, it was simply the abbot's *officium* to pray. Perhaps Suger was seen by those around him in terms of his function rather than his personality. But we are left with the impression of genuine achievement. Suger was a particularly small man; but as William commented, "Good Jesus, what strength, how much spirit was in him!"⁵⁸

A COMMENT ON THE TEXT

The Latin text of the *Deeds* is fairly straightforward. Eight manuscripts were at the disposal of Waquet when he produced his edition, including several full texts of the twelfth century, and it is usually clear what Suger wrote.⁵⁹ Such problems as there are stem from Suger's vocabulary and his style, which copyists tried to improve. In general we have sought to translate the text as written by Suger, avoiding it only where grammatical mistakes render it impossible or difficult. Such cases are indicated in the notes.

One manuscript, ms. *f*, presents additional problems, for it differs from all other manuscripts in certain ways. Frequently it changes the style of the Latin, and more importantly it adds

material. It now seems impossible to determine whether Suger stands in some manner behind this manuscript. We note in it a persistent tendency to style Louis *rex Francie*, in contrast to the *rex Francorum* frequently found in Waquet's edition of the *Deeds*, although there occur in both Waquet's edition and ms. f certain odd expressions, such as "arms as powerful as Hector's." It is true that ms. f contains a reference to "we who wrote the history of the lord Louis," but elsewhere it refers to Suger in the third person. Suger may well have been involved in the process that led to the composition of ms. f, but the position is not clear, and so we have ignored it.⁶⁰

THE DEEDS OF LOUIS THE FAT
