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Françoise Gasparri, *Suger de Saint-Denis: Abbé, soldat, homme d'État au XII<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Paris: ePicard, 2015. 208 pp. 16 colour plates, bibliography, and index. 32 € (pb). ISBN 978-2-7084-0991-0.

Review by Charlotte Pickard, Cardiff University.

Abbot Suger, a towering figure of the early twelfth century, is the subject of Françoise Gasparri's book. As the title suggests, the aim of this book is to explore Suger, a complex, versatile churchman, and his far-reaching, diverse duties. Abbot Suger has been the focus of previous biographies and has received extensive attention from historians and art historians alike. In this book, Gasparri attempts to reclaim Suger from those who, she believes, have often focused on his contribution as founder of Gothic architecture in France, to the detriment of his other achievements (p. 101). Thus, this book aims to redress that balance. While not innovative among the existing historiography, this book nevertheless helps to deepen our understanding of Suger. A Benedictine monk, Abbot Suger was most notably abbot of Saint-Denis, as well as a renowned orator and negotiator, counsellor to the king, regent during the Second Crusade, historian, and, of course, the initiator of Gothic architecture in France. Gasparri's book draws on her previous work to inform this engaging account of Suger's life, his achievements and works.

Gasparri's book is divided into larger sections, which are then subdivided according to specific events and themes. The book opens with an introductory section, which is partitioned into contextual themes, offering an essential backdrop to Suger's life. Both secular and ecclesiastical advancements are discussed in this section, including the development of France and the resurgence of royal power under Philip I and Louis VI, the difficulties facing the Church in the twelfth century, ecclesiastical reform, and the crusading movement. This section acts as a necessary foundation for the subsequent sections, providing context for what is a complex period. This is especially useful for those scholars who are new to the period, or who may not be so familiar with the circumstances that helped to shape Suger and his beliefs.

The second section shifts its focus to Suger's life, acting as a biography: from an exploration of his birth and family, through his formative years as a monk of Saint-Denis, to his succession as abbot, finally ending with his death in 1151. In this section we learn about Suger as a secular and ecclesiastical figure, including his relationships with Louis VI and Louis VII, both in a political and military capacity. Additionally, we learn of his standing in the wider Church, at a national and international level. We also learn of Suger's influences, especially his time in Italy and from his interactions with other churchmen and his predecessor Abbot Adam. Gasparri argues that it was these connections and experiences that helped to shape Suger, offering inspiration for his later works at the abbey.

The latter sections of Gasparri's book are dedicated to Suger's achievements, including his contribution to the abbey of Saint-Denis, his writings, and his building work. Gasparri's third section is dedicated to Suger in his capacity as the abbot of Saint-Denis. Thankfully for the reader, despite attempting to retrieve Suger from the art historical world, Gasparri does not neglect to discuss Suger's building works, his installation of magnificent stained glass windows, or the lavish liturgical items that were commissioned, restored, and acquired during his abbacy. As one would expect, this section covers well-

trodden ground, providing sufficient detail for the reader to gain an insight into the works, without substantially recreating existing scholarship. This section is supported by a series of colour plates depicting the building works, stained glass, and liturgical items that are reviewed there. Gasparri situates Suger's work and iconographic programme in the wider context of his redevelopment of Saint-Denis. In addition to Suger's art historical contributions, we learn about his reformation of the abbey and his attempts to further the abbey's royal connections. As in the previous section, Gasparri emphasises the influence that Suger's experiences had in developing his ideas: the building works at Saint-Denis reflect the time that he spent in Italy, drawing inspiration from Rome and Montecassino. In this section, the reader gains the impression that Suger had a very keen awareness of his responsibilities towards the abbey and that his works were driven by the desire to use beauty to enhance the abbey's prestige.

Suger's written legacy is the focus of the fourth section, including not only his better known texts, *Vie de Louis le Gros*, *De Administratione*, and *De Consecratione*, but also his correspondence and charters. This section, in particular, provides us with an insight into Suger's character and beliefs. It also offers us an understanding of the network of churchmen who influenced his thoughts. Gasparri offers rich discussion of Suger's role as a royal historian. She also highlights how much we can learn about Suger from the charters that he left behind and argues that they are fundamental to understanding his work. Gasparri leaves us with the impression that Suger was conscious of the permanence of a written legacy, that it is "œuvre plus durable que le bronze" (p. 149). This feels like the most cohesive section with the richest analysis of the material that is presented. However, while Suger was prolific in his writing, one could argue that Gasparri overstates his originality.

Gasparri's penultimate section, *La pensée et le programme politique de l'abbé Suger* is the shortest of the main sections and focuses heavily on Suger's exploitation of the abbey's ancient royal connections, as well as exploring Suger's secular role as a royal advisor. In places, overlapping with earlier sections, Gasparri considers in greater depth the way in which Suger utilised Saint-Denis' history and its connection to the monarchy through its founder, the Merovingian king, Dagobert and successive Carolingian and early Capetian kings. This section, once again, sets out the influence of Saint-Denis' history on Suger and his ambitions for the abbey. Additionally, it contains a description of the audacious false charter of Charlemagne, which aimed, but failed, to establish Saint-Denis as the coronation church, signalling the extent to which Saint-Denis' history was exploited during Suger's abbacy. While Suger may have failed in this respect, the recognition of the vexillum of the Vexin, later known as the Oriflamme, as the royal standard, signalled Suger's ultimate success as an abbot.

Gasparri argues in these latter sections that Suger's architectural, historiographical, and iconographic programme showed a clear cohesion of the ancient and the new, as demonstrated in his eagerness to celebrate the abbey's royal connections to the three royal dynasties--the Merovingians, the Carolingians, and the ruling Capetians. Suger acted to bring all three dynasties into the liturgy, as well as including them in charters and the foundation of royal anniversaries. While previous Capetian kings had been buried at Saint-Denis, Philip I chose to be interred at Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire, jeopardising Saint-Denis' standing as the royal necropolis.[1] Thus, Gasparri highlights that, through his works, Suger endeavoured to re-establish the abbey's position as the royal necropolis, as well as securing the abbey's future status and prosperity by preserving the memory of kings, offering a sense of legitimacy and stability to the monarchy.

Gasparri's conclusion acts as a kind of post-script, providing the reader with an account of the aftermath of Suger's death and the crisis that ensued at Saint-Denis. One is left with a forlorn impression that much of Suger's hard work was undermined after his death. In her conclusion, Gasparri examines, in greater detail, Suger's posthumous biography, written by his secretary, William. William's text forms the basis for much of our understanding of Suger's abbacy and is a valuable inclusion. Gasparri ends her conclusion by summarising the key, overarching ideas that feature throughout her book. One of the

main points to arise in the conclusion is that Suger's work was carried out for the good of the abbey that he referred to as his "mother." Despite benefitting the monarchy, the ties that Suger sought to strengthen were primarily intended to enhance the abbey's standing.

One of the overarching aims of this book is to explore the complexity of Suger across the range of duties that he occupied during his lifetime. We are presented with a worldly, versatile churchman who understood the importance of cultivating secular relationships in order to enhance the importance of his abbey. Suger's secular responsibilities are evident throughout the book, however, it is Suger's relationship with Saint-Denis that dominates Gasparri's account. Having entered into monastic life at the age of ten, the abbey, its archives and library helped to mould Suger into the abbot that he became. He worked tirelessly to reform, restore and reclaim the abbey's place as the foremost religious house in France. Gasparri emphasises that consequently Suger felt a profound responsibility towards Saint-Denis and its royal past. The reader is left with a strong impression that Suger utilised this heritage in order to enhance the abbey's reputation and secure its future at the centre of the French Church, with Saint-Denis as France's patron saint and protector of the French monarchy, thus furthering the mutually beneficial relationship between the monarchy and Saint-Denis. On the whole, Gasparri's division and sub-division of sections works well and makes the book an accessible read. For those wishing to obtain specific information, it allows the reader to easily identify relevant material. While the structure of this text is effective, due to the necessary overlap in some sections, it has meant a certain amount of repetition and in some instances this has resulted in disjointedness, interrupting the flow of the narrative. Despite this, however, it remains an engaging book.

There are scant footnotes in Gasparri's book. The bibliography demonstrates that it is well researched, however. Extensive reading has been carried out, in addition to drawing on the author's previous work. While Gasparri has used few archival materials, Suger's works and other primary sources are quoted throughout and printed primary sources, including Gasparri's own editions of Suger's work, are employed.[2] Previous biographies of Suger are present in the bibliography, with one notable omission, Lindy Grant's 1998 book, *Abbot Suger of St-Denis: Church and State in Early Twelfth-Century France*, which similarly explores Suger in both an ecclesiastical and secular capacity.[3]

*Suger de Saint-Denis: Abbé, soldat, homme d'État au XII<sup>e</sup> siècle* offers a good introduction to those wanting to become better acquainted with this fascinating twelfth-century figure. It is an ambitious book that aims to cover a wide scope of material, exploring a complex individual who held multiple offices. At times, Gasparri's book can feel overly narrative and uncritical in its approach to previous historiography. For example, in the introductory section, Gasparri propounds the notion that the friendship between Louis VI and Suger was forged when they attended school together at Saint-Denis-de-l'Estrée, a concept that has been questioned in more recent years and for which there is little evidence.[4] However, other sections, such as that on Suger's writing afford us a genuine insight and clearly display Gasparri's admiration for Suger's work. While repetitive in places, the text successfully conveys a sense of Suger and his many and varied responsibilities, helping us to gain a greater understanding of the man and the beliefs that lay behind his work and ambitions. While the aim of this book, to integrate and emphasise Suger's different roles, is not a new one, it nevertheless provides us with an interesting insight into a fascinating man.

## NOTES

[1] James Naus, "Negotiating Kingship in France at the Time of the Early Crusades: Suger and the *Gesta Ludovici Grossi*," *French Historical Studies* 36 (2013): 531.

[2] Suger, *Œuvres*, Françoise Gasparri, ed. and trans., 2 vols. (Paris: Belles-Lettres, 1996-2001).

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[3] Lindy Grant, *Abbot Suger of St-Denis: Church and State in Early Twelfth-Century France* (Harlow: Longman, 1998).

[4] Lindy Grant, *Abbot Suger of St-Denis*, p. 79.

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