

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF SAINT DENIS IN EARLY FRENCH GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE

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Research Article

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ABSTRACT: Of the many sculptures on the facades of cathedrals and churches all over France, the curious Head-carriers, also known as *Cephalophores*, are arguably some of the most thought-provoking sculptural pieces one will come across. This study is concerned mainly with the iconography of St Denis, the first Bishop of France, as articulated on the portals of the Basilica of St-Denis. The events that followed immediately after Denis' martyrdom by decapitation is mostly regarded as mere fable. Consequently, the symbolic meaning of the unusual movement has evaded scholarship. This work will discuss the symbolism of the Head-carriers and the meaning it gives to the architectural space of the Basilica of St Denis. This study argues that the ideology behind the sublime interaction between the living and the dead in the Basilica of St Denis, epitomised by the statue of the martyr, is a visual representation of a central message in Christianity. This ideology presents death, not as the end, but as a transitory and glorious beginning of oneness with Christ. Through critical visual analysis and metaphysical discussions, the study places Gothic art and architecture in the centre of the enunciation of 16th century Christian doctrine.

KEYWORDS: St Denis, Cephalophore, Iconography, Gothic Art, Gothic Architecture, Symbolism.

INTRODUCTION

The sum of the last days of Saint Denis presented to us through art, is a vivid account of the coarseness and crass realities of 3rd century Christianity. The singular statement visually celebrated in sculpture eloquently captures the mystery that has made Dionysius (Denis) even more potent in death, than alive. Nowhere is the idea behind this potency felt more than in the Basilica of Saint-Denis in France, a space that embodies a balance between the energies of life and death. Named in honour of the first Bishop of France, the basilica radiates a copious aura of importance and stateliness. In the Basilica of Saint Denis, the dead are metaphorically animated in sculpture and light.

Forty-two kings, thirty-two queens, sixty-three princes and princesses and ten great men of the realm lay there. As one walks amidst the remains of early French royals, one feels the palpable energy of significance and royalty. This paper is concerned with the symbolic meaning the many funerary effigies that lay about the interior of the abbey give to the architectural space. The study argues that the symbolic interaction between the living and the dead in the Basilica of Saint Denis is a visual metaphor that offers a narrative of transcendental continuity rather than terminal reality. Further, this paper will

argue that the killing and death of Dionysius, later Saint Denis, the perpetuation of the legend through church art, and the arrogation of his story as a *cephalophore*, is a principal example and confirmation of the use of art as a tool for the enunciation of the transcendental nature of death.

While the Basilica of Saint Denis in France boasts of the recumbent statues of many great individuals, one piece stands out even among kings, queens, princes, and princesses. It is that of the cleric - Saint Denis. According to his hagiography, after being incarcerated for a period because of the Decian persecution of Christians around 250 AD, Bishop Denis will eventually face a series of torturous acts that would ultimately end in his death by decapitation, making him a martyr in the mid-3rd century alongside two others, Eleutherus and Rusticus. The real story unfolds after Denis' beheading. The headless body is recorded to have risen immediately from its knees; it picked up the detached head and walked several kilometres. The account of [Jacobus and Ryan \[1\]](#) records that Saint Denis' mouth continued to preach while he walked with his head in his hands from Montmartre to his burial place, the present location of the basilica of Saint Denis. This will make him one of the earliest known *cephalophores* in church history. *Cephalophores* are generally individuals who were

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martyred by decapitation and are reported to have exhibited coherent post-decapitation movements and sometimes vocalisation, often with the severed head in their hands. The phenomenon is portrayed in art as headless figures carrying their severed heads in their hands. The word *cephalophore* is Greek for 'Head Carrier'.

METHODOLOGY

This study has employed qualitative methods for data gathering, interpretation and analysis. Data for this study was mainly collected through desk research, visual observations of photographic documents, and on-site analysis of relevant sculptural works at the Basilica of St Denis, France.

Church of St-Denis in literature

This study finds that literature on the Basilica of Saint Denis is extensive and varied, however, it mostly focuses on the architectural history of the structure and the significance of the basilica to the early gothic movement [2-9]. Ample investigation has also been offered on the structural and architectural merits of the Abbey. While the above focus holds the majority, some studies have indeed paid some attention to the rich array of recumbent sculptural pieces of past French royals housed in the abbey but minding only little for presenting an argument on the symbolic assembly [10]. This assembly of sculptural effigies resting rather lively in and around the transept and nave of the church, well among the living, is unmissable. The Basilica of St Denis is indeed the earliest experimentation and playground for what was then called *opus modernum* (modern architecture) and does exhibit significant artistry and craftsmanship worthy of distracting scholarship from the more intrinsic character of the building.

Bork [11] has dealt with the geometrics of Saint Denis Basilica in great detail. In an earlier study by the same author, he suggests that the rotation of polygons was the key to the proportioning strategy in Gothic architecture, stating that squares or quadratures are the most common examples [12]. He further alludes that other shapes such as hexagons, octagons, and dodecagon also lend themselves rather easily to such manipulations in gothic geometry. Through a determinative study of Altenberg Cistercian Church, Bork [11] identifies a reoccurring sequence and angle of rotation common in many Gothic cathedrals around Europe. The study recognises St-Denis' geometric principle as a forerunner in gothic formulas, and this is not as a

result of being the earliest gothic articulation in architecture as Bork argues, but on the sheer ingenuity of Abbott Suger. Suger was the mastermind behind the transformation of the abbey into a pristine specimen of early gothic form and character. The Altenberg Cistercian Church, which Bork studies as a comparative model to St-Denis, belongs to a tradition that can be traced from St-Denis to the choir of Amiens, Beauvais, and Cologne Cathedrals. This confirms St-Denis as a geometric standard for gothic churches. Having reviewed the past works of Kidson [5] and Crosby [13] on the geometrics of St-Denis, and finding meaningful correlations, Bork [11] opines that the evidence for such continuity of geometrical knowledge is made apparent in the relationship between St-Denis and Altenberg. Altenberg, as he puts it, after all, shares not only the seven-chapel layout with St-Denis, but also the unusual optical alignment of its chevet piers. Similarly, Altenberg's overall scale matches that of St-Denis to an uncanny degree. Further Bork suggests that it will not be totally unimaginable that the designer of Altenberg spoke with someone in the St-Denis workshop about techniques of aligning certain elements of the architecture before deciding to replicate such.

Boorstin [14] puts light in the centre of the discussions about church architecture. He explores the early beginnings of gothic expressions in the Abbey of St Denis through the skill and dedication of the statesman and master builder Suger who was born ca. 1081 to a peasant family near Paris. Boorstin [14] ascribes the excellence of the articulation, and what one might call the persuasion of light as a building element, to Suger's insight and unabashed taste for the gorgeous. He states that Suger embodies the anagogic--which is "the Upward Leading" as interpreted in theology--of the building, as he, Suger, did with light in St-Denis what God did with it in the world.

Leschot [10] on the other hand turns to the royal heritage of St-Denis as the framework for the construction of meaning in the abbey which has been the prime temple for the coronation of French Kings since Pepin the Short. Though this work focuses largely on the historical legacies of regal coronation in the context of two main locations; Reims and St-Denis, one is able to see in Leschot's study; the core significance of art as the centre of sacred persuasion and a point of spirituality in church architecture. Leschot [10] spends some detail on the reconstruction of the Basilica of St-Denis and the key role of Suger in the process stating that the driving force behind Suger's

enterprise is one of liturgical importance crystallised through art. The article underscores the use of art in architecture as the embodiment of power and significance in religious spaces. As [Leschot \[10\]](#) dealt with the historical legacy of the reconstruction and structural adjustments to St-Denis over the years, [Boström \[15\]](#) focuses on the legacy of Gothic sculpture as seen on St-Denis and other cathedrals of repute in France. In a simple but well scripted-piece, [Boström \[15\]](#) discusses figural sculpture in the context of church architecture. The piece takes a chronological approach to explaining the metamorphosis of style from the Romanesque period, through the earliest era of Gothic era, to the High Gothic period of 1140-1300. We are greeted with explicate examples from St-Denis to Charters to Senlis, Reims and so forth. The piece however identifies the Abbey church of St-Denis as the centre point where the true characteristic structure of the gothic sculptured portal was established. Again, St-Denis is featured as a prime example of the ideals of gothic pronunciations. Boström further asserts that the construction of complex iconographic programs on church facades made Christian teaching accessible to a broad and socially diverse public, while the high degree of naturalism in individual figures triggered the identification and empathetic engagement that allowed the figures to assume personal meaning for their beholders. This is a clear indication of the conscious use of sculptural art in not only aesthetic matters of the church, but in more central issues such as indoctrination and evangelism. This declaration is pivotal to this current study.

Some pro-modernists may challenge a study into ancient church symbolism and question the relevance of such inquiry. This concern is valid and similar to the concerns we have when we think generally of the relevance of the study of the past. To what purpose do we study history – particularly that of religion, art, and architecture? Why is it important for this study, for instance, to confirm that art remains a central tool in the enunciation of certain religious ideals. What need is there for us in the postmodern world to belabour our minds with the art of medieval beautification? What wisdom does this ancient knowledge offer us?

These questions serve as a conscience and compass that guide our inquiry. They present us with the multivariate options that help us navigate our path through the maze of inquiries in the humanities. This study agrees with the words from

John Ruskin as quoted in [Connelly \[16\]](#) as a kind of commission:

“Go forth again to gaze upon the old cathedrals front, where you have smiled so often at the fantastic ignorance of the old sculptors: examine once more those ugly goblins, and formless monsters, and stern statues...; but do not mock at them, for they are signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone; a freedom of thought, and rank in scale of being, such as no laws, no charters, no charities can secure; but which it must be the first aim of all Europe at this day to regain for her children”.

Perhaps this whole venture is to redirect our attention to freedom in architecture.

The basilica, the builder

The Abbey of Saint-Denis-en-France is the most famous and glorious among all the notable abbeys and cathedrals of the Kingdom of France. It is foremost among the abbeys of all Gaul and perhaps of all Europe [\[17\]](#). It was Suger however, who took this already venerated Benedictine abbey from its late Romanesque character to opus modernum, starting a new era of the Gothic movement, and making himself a key figure in the development of Gothic architecture in France. The basilica that emerged from the tireless work of Suger served as a burial place for French monarchs from the Merovingian era of 447 – 751 AD through to the Bourbon era up till the early 19th century. Suger chronicled the renovation of the Abbey Church dating 1137 – 1144 and the work is said to be one of the most important documents of the middle age on account of the details [\[18\]](#).

While it may be seen as a detour from the main interest of this paper, it will be expedient to draw some attention to Abbot Suger here through a summary. He was in every way a builder, statesman and masterful patron. He dedicated his life to the revitalisation of the old abbey and as his account will show, he turned it into a magnificent piece of art worthy of kings both heavenly and temporal. One will probably best describe Suger’s dedication in the words of [Lee \[19\]](#), who writes that in the past, Christians gladly served as patrons of church architecture because it proclaimed their faith and affirmed their world views. In every word, this is true of Suger. He gloried in his lowly origins stating, “I, the beggar, whom the strong hand of the Lord has lifted up from the dunghill”. Self-ascribing as an adopted child of St-Denis, he felt that as he

belonged to the Church, so the church belonged to him [14].

The need for Suger to work on the Abbey came as a pragmatic one. By 1122 when Suger became abbot of Saint Denis, the Abbey was already incapable of holding the crowds that came to worship particularly on feast days. The endless crowds came to Saint-Denis to adore the many sacred relics and to participate in spectacular celebrations and processions of all kinds. The congestion in the church often became unbearable; as Ostoia [17] wrote, sometimes people were crushed to death because of huge gathering. Suger decided to enlarge the basilica to accommodate these crowds and make the abbey worthy of its position. With this expansion came several innovations that will set the trend for gothic expressions throughout all of France. An example is a former oculus on the west façade that served as a precursor of the later popular rose windows.

Today, the basilica remains a vivid example of the beginnings of the Gothic movement and a laboratory to study the careful and brilliant transition from late Romanesque to Gothic style. Many of the features we see today are borrowed branches from the Romanesque style but have evolved into a clear gothic identity. For the whole of France and its gothic legacy, we have Suger to thank but it will be utterly lopsided if one fails to mention the name of another ‘disciple’ who felt called to preserve the gothic legacy that was falling into ruins – it is Voilett-le-Duc; the one who in the 19th century made extensive renovations and study on the gothic inheritance of France. It is only on such shoulders that later research is to stand and flourish. Without their efforts, there may be nothing left to wonder about the early gothic age, nothing to build on, certainly nothing as magnificent as the glorious works of the late gothic era. Further, the impact of the study and preservation work by Voilett-le-Duc’s revitalisation of French Gothic ideas becomes mostly apparent in the evaluation of how gothic forms were integral tools in the behest of the church to evangelise and instruct the populace of the time. Voilett-le-Duc’s core architectural philosophy may probably be best seen in his drawings and construction of the Saint-Denis-de-l’Estrée. The space is enigmatic and presents an energy that seems as though time walked backwards, making the presence of history palpable and experiential. Indeed, the space idealises the concept of feeling the weight of time on one’s shoulders. In the context of space as represented in religious architecture, time, is truly a heavy mass,

particularly when one considers the many layers of events that have occurred in the space in question.

Cephalophores; a metaphor for resilience in Christian doctrine

Marcel Hebert, the French philosopher is credited with the first use of the word *cephalophore* in his 1914 in article “Les Martyrs Cephalophore Euchaire, Elophe et Libaire” published in the nineteenth volume of the University of Bruxelles’ *Revue de l’Université de Bruxelles*. The term “*Cephalophore*”, mostly common in Judeo-Christian art. As earlier stated, it is generally used to describe individuals (later saints) reported to have exhibited coherent post-decapitation movements and sometimes vocalization, often with the severed head in their hands. It is perhaps expected of anyone who is to write about *cephalophores*--at least as far as the Western Europe is concerned--to start with, and possibly pivot the discourse on Saint Denis, the first Bishop of France. This paper will not deviate from this expectation and the reason is nothing academic but the fact that Saint Denis is perceived to be the most popular *cephalophore* ever recorded and as such gathers such importance and reverence, though there are several other *cephalophores* as recorded in the hagiographic literature. All through medieval writings, one is confronted with the accounts of several other ‘head carriers’ exhibiting the same inconceivable act of coherent post-decapitation locomotion. St Nicasius, the 5th century Bishop of Reims is one of the more well-known examples.

The present site of the Reims Cathedral was chosen by Bishop Nicasius (later Saint) who built a basilica in honour of the Virgin Mary in the 5th century. Like St-Denis and Notre Dame Cathedral of Paris, Reims Cathedral presents no less of a wonder to observe. The current Reims Cathedral, like the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris and many other religious buildings of the world, sits on the site of two former basilicas. The cathedral boasts of hosting the coronation ceremony of twenty-five kings of France, from Louis VIII the Lion in 1223 to Charles X in 1825 [20] – that is a span of six hundred years. Nicasius was recorded to have been reciting Psalm 119 when he was brutally executed alongside two faithful (very much like Saint Denis) Florentius and Jucundus, by marauders at the doorstep of the church. It is recorded that at the instance he reached verse 25 of the Psalm ‘*my soul clings to the dust*’ his head was severed by the slayer’s cleaver. Picking the detached head up, vocalisation continued from the head saying –

'revive me according to thy word', how terrified his killers would have been at such bizarre sight. There is a very emotive sculpture of the founding Bishop and Saint, Nicasius strategically placed between angels on the reverse side of the front façade of Reims Cathedral. The figure shows the decapitated bishop with his mitered head in his hands. This symbolic icon of a *cephalophore* articulates the early history of the foundations of the cathedral and presents a touchpoint for the discussion of the duality and concurrent self-existence of death and life.

On the west end, just behind the figure of Saint Nicasius, are two rose windows. The one that sets as backdrop for Saint Nicasius' statue is known as the Small Rose Window - The Litanies of Mary, while atop that is the Great Rose. The Great Rose window feature a brilliant array of representations that include the twelve apostles, the 24 angels, cherubim, and seraphim, six kings of Israel and a centre piece on Mary. Soft light passing through the coloured glass before noon presents the interior west end in a symphony of pleasing light.

Another case is that of Saint Aphrodisius of (Alexandria) Bezier. He was attacked by pagans and beheaded while preaching the gospel. He is recorded to have retrieved his head in the presence of his slayers and carried it to a nearby church he had recently consecrated. At this place, the body finally rested. The story of Osyth is similar – she picked up her head after decapitation and walked a considerable distance with it in her hands to a convent, where she finally collapsed and rested. Saint Gemolo is reported to have carried his detached head and mounted a horse. He rode on horseback with his head to meet a Bishop in the nearby mountains before he finally buckled and passed on. Many more *cephalophores* were recorded, they include Saint Minias, Saint Valerie, Saint Firmin, Saint Maxien, Sibling Saints Felix and Regula, Saint Maurice, Saint Alban, Saint Lambert of Saragosse, Saint Gaines of Nantes, Saint Solange, Saint Winefride and so on. There is in fact an exhaustive list of about 134 names in French hagiographic literature [21]. The *cephalophoric* phenomenon is not limited to Roman Christian cultures alone. They have also been recorded in other cultures. A popular example is *Chinnamasta* – a Hindu goddess. Always depicted nude, headless and usually standing over a copulating couple with her severed head in one hand and a scimitar in another. Broadly speaking, it was relatively common to be killed for faith during the early Christian era.

The times were harsh for those who professed Christianity. Besides decapitation, many Saints met their end in the most brutal ways. Saint Erasmus of Formia (ca. 303AD) was disembowelled, Saint Hippolytus of Rome was pulled apart by horses, Saint Bartholomew the Apostle was said to be flayed alive, Saint Agatha's breasts were cut off, Saint Apollonia's teeth were removed forcefully, and Saint Lucy's eyes plucked out.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The iconography of a headless body carrying his or her head is a curious and powerful imagery to behold, but what message does this symbolic spectacle hold and how is this relevant to us today? In this study's view, the visual statement captured by these body of works stand for defiance to death, resilience, and commitment to purpose in the face of challenges. The 'Head Carrier' icon presents the unassailable nature of an idea or belief even in the face of death. The icon symbolises the mystery of life in death as professed by the Christian faith. The *cephalophore* imagery articulates the knowledge that encourages an idea or belief to thrive beyond the limits of the individual host.

This study aligns with the submission of Cirlot [22] in his brilliant introduction to the work *The Dictionary of Symbols* where he submits to the argument of Marius Schneider that there is no such thing as 'ideas or beliefs', only 'ideas and beliefs'. This is to say that in one, there is always at least something of the other. Because of the power and interactivity between ideas and belief, there is some reason in the notion that while it may be relatively easy to eliminate an idea's carrier, it is more demanding altogether to suppress the ideology itself. The iconographies of *cephalophores* thus become a commanding statement or euphemism for continued hope and a reawakening even in the face of death.

Thus, this study opines that the sculptural ensemble of funeral effigies strategically placed within the space of worship in St-Denis, symbolises the triumph of life over death as understood by Judeo-Christian belief. The art presents an example of the transition from earthly to heavenly life in Christ. The broad reverence and admonitions given to *cephalophores* through art in church architecture, suggest that the works speak to a central doctrine of the church which directs all to find life in Christ even in death. The continued role of art as a vehicle through which the Christian faith

preserves legacy is thus underscored. Sculptural arts and ornamentation on religious buildings offer us a type of collective awareness and in many cases, an identity that subsumes social or racial difference and is immune to the trials of changing times. Further, sculptural art and ornamentation is steadfast in its message and encourages mental consciousness of simple images or visual symbols that instructs us.

Architecture, through the parsing of art, presents itself here as a most viable template for the capture and preservation of the enigmatic story of martyrdom. Art is an effective language that maintains the meaning and influence of the narrative through changing times. The simple iconographic image of Denis as a *cephalophore* brings such immense attention to the idea that the act stands for perhaps even more than the story of the act itself. We are drawn to the stories today not by the text in record or the telling by a minstrel, but by the visual oration that drives us to ask questions. And in asking we may find answers that will move us to a place of knowledge, or at least a place of awareness of not just the phenomenon but the message encapsulate therein. The knowing of a thing then empowers us to live out the meaning for which the initial message was intended. The visual prose offered several hundred years ago in sculpture and hosted by architecture still resonates with us today. The works bring with them the courage to face our utmost fears. They give a renewed sense of freedom albeit from death.

This study further argues that the plainness--or if one must be more critical in phrasing--the barrenness of an architectural surface does not necessarily suggest high beauty as positioned by modernist and post modernists theorists. In fact, it may very well be a miss-opportunity in religious design. The craft of integrating symbolic art into architectural skin and spaces is indeed an opportunity to exercise freedom from repression and honesty of expression, for the consumption of all who is to come across it in space and time. In his 1908 treatise of the Viennese architect, Adolf Loos, who is famously credited with the construct 'ornament is crime', Loos presents ornaments as an invention of the primitive man; an invention he believes must ultimately give in to the superiority of the emerging machine age. This ideology falls short of humanism in architectural expressions.

It presents a form of sterility of thought and the strangulation of the organic nature of life. There is a clarity that comes with visual language which speaks to human inward sensibilities. It remains

constant in message and purpose despite the years. It is this critical nature of art that has endeared art to religion and perhaps, religion to arts. Religion, more than any other aspect of man's existence, has engaged the inexplicable power of art in the evangelisation of its central message. This study submits that this is palpable and deliberate in cephalophoric art. The idea of cutting the head carrier in stone is seen as an image of triumph and inspiration to followers much the same way Christianity uses the very symbol of the cross as its universal representation; the same cross on which the Christian messiah was crucified. An act deemed necessary in Christendom for the fullness of the glory of the messiah to be actualised in the eye of men.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the iconography of the *cephalophore* is a representation of the message of Christianity which presents death, not as the end, but a transitory beginning of a higher existence as represented by the Christian doctrine. This gives credence to the long-standing position that the early church engaged sculpture, as seen on gothic architecture, as a medium for the instruction of adherents. Further, this position supports the argument that church art transcends the spheres of aesthetics, rather, it carries on a utilitarian dimension when viewed from the point of its role in liturgy and rituals. Therefore, in so far as a structure is related to or concerned with worship of any type, the continued integration and use of figural arts as a language in the propagation of ideal or philosophies of a group must be encouraged in architecture. In context, architecture's role is to provide a platform for the enunciation of philosophies necessary for the transmission of ideas. As the head-carrying headless icon pervades many parts of France, and Europe, the covert message which presents an idea in life, and carry it unto death, is sublimely reinforced by the continued presence of these sculptures.

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Competing interests

The author declares that there are no competing interests.

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