

A royal necropolis

Close links with the monarchy

Thanks to the popular veneration of Saint Denis, the basilica very soon linked its destiny to that of the royalty. It became the preferred necropolis of the French monarchs, and each new dynasty continued this tradition in order to support its legitimacy. 42 kings, 32 queens, 63 princes and princesses and 10 great men of the realm were buried here; even Napoleon I wanted to make it into an imperial necropolis. Dagobert was the first king to be buried here. With only a very few exceptions, all the monarchs were buried here from Hugues Capet onwards. The first official histories of France were written by the monks of Saint Denis.

Exceptional funeral art

Today the basilica has over 70 recumbent statues and tombs, a unique collection in Europe. This gives an idea of changes in funeral art, from 12th-century statues sculpted with open eyes to the large compositions dating from the Renaissance, associating death with the hope of resurrection.

Glossary

Abbey: a monastery led by an abbot or abbess.

Basilica: this term is used from the 4th century onwards for churches built with marble columns and a wooden ceiling, by comparison with secular Roman buildings. This name is also a privilege granted to pilgrimage churches.

Cathedral: the main church in a diocese with the bishop's see.

Cenotaph: a funeral monument where the body is not present.

Praying statue or orant: a funeral statue representing a person praying.

Recumbent statue: a funeral statue representing a person lying down.

Rib: an arch used to support a vault.

Rose window: a large round stained glass window.

Information

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Saint Denis Basilica Cathedral

Necropolis of the kings of France

A royal abbey

The basilica* stands on the site of a Gallo-Roman cemetery with the tomb of Saint Denis, thought



to have been the first Bishop of Paris, who was martyred circa 250AD.

This place of pilgrimage was built in the 5th century. Dagobert was a benefactor

to it in the 7th century, and Pepin the Short was crowned king here in 754. It became one of the most powerful Benedictine abbeys in the Middle Ages. Most of the kings and queens of France were buried here from the 6th century onwards.

The birth of Gothic art

In the 12th century, Suger, Abbot of Saint Denis, was an influential political figure. He turned the abbey into a masterpiece of what came to be known as early Gothic art. He rebuilt the structure using new architectural techniques, including the rose window* and cross-ribbed vault, bathing the building in coloured light. More work was done in the 13th century, during the reign of Saint Louis, giving the basilica its present appearance. However the Abbey was plunged into decline by wars and the Revolution. It was restored in the 19th century, particularly by Viollet-le-Duc, before becoming a cathedral* in 1966.

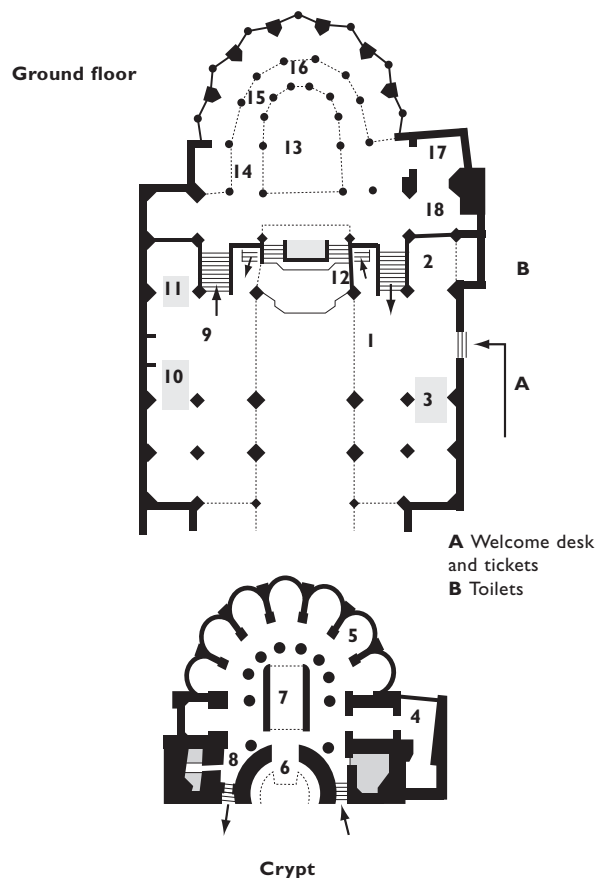
* Explanations overleaf.

The southern transept

- 1 Saint Louis's order** for 16 recumbent statues* was made in around 1263; some 14 remain today. The king wished to demonstrate that the Capetian dynasty was heir to the Merovingian and Carolingian lines.
- 2 Recumbent statues from the time of the Valois.** The statue of Charles V, the Wise, is certainly the first official portrait in the history of funeral sculpture and a masterpiece of medieval sculpture.
- 3 The tomb of François I,** Claude de France and three of their children was put into place eleven years after the king's death in 1547. The victor of the Battle of Marignan is presented in an imposing triumphal arch, a sign of the rediscovery of classical antiquity during the Renaissance.

The crypt

- 4 The Bourbon chapel** contains cenotaphs* made in the 19th century in honour of the Bourbon dynasty, and the heart of Louis XVII.
- 5 Suger's crypt** has several capitals devoted particularly to the life of Saint Benedict. One of the chapels in the deambulatory houses the sarcophagus of Queen Arégonde, the wife of King Clotaire, who died between 580 and 590, the first queen to be buried at Saint-Denis.
- 6 The archaeological crypt** shows the remains of earlier structures. This area was the location of the tombs of the martyred Saints Denis, Rustique and Eleuthère.
- 7 The Bourbon grave** holds the remains of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette, transferred from the Madeleine cemetery in Paris by Louis XVIII, the last king to be buried in the basilica, in 1824.



- 8 The royal ossuary** contains bones exhumed from the royal tombs at the time of the Revolution, and gathered together by Louis XVIII.

The northern transept

- 9 The upper stained glass windows,** including the two rose windows, were added in the 19th century to replace the medieval stained glass windows whose lead was melted during the Revolution.
- 10 Louis XII and Anne de Bretagne** are represented dead, naked and flayed inside the Carrara marble tomb, and alive and praying on the upper part.

- 11 Henri II and Catherine of Medici** have a monumental tomb, built between 1560 and 1573, inspired by Italian practices, in particular the use of different colours of the same materials. The Germain Pilon sculptures, particularly the virtues in the corners, are of very high quality.
- 12 King Dagobert's tomb** is located where the monarch was buried in 639, to the right of Saint Denis's relics.

The chevet

- 13 Abbot Suger's chevet,** a major work built between 1140 and 1144, with the upper parts rebuilt in the 18th century, was made to present the martyred saints' reliquaries. The absence of walls between the chapels and the large windows creates an uninterrupted wall of light.
- 14 The Merovingian kings and queens.** The recumbent statues of Clovis, the first Christian Frankish king, his son Childebert, and Frédégonde, were brought here from Parisian churches in the 19th century.
- 15 These two recumbent statues** are among the rare metal tombs which are preserved to this day. They are for the two children of Saint Louis who died in infancy.
- 16 Five atrium windows** remain from Abbot Suger's stained glass windows. Spared during the Revolution, they were later badly damaged and reassembled in the 19th century.

Saint Louis chapel

- 17 The banner** is a copy of the standard carried by the royal army in time of war.
- 18 The praying statues* of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette** were commissioned by Louis XVIII when the ashes of the king and queen were returned, and were completed circa 1830.

* Explanations overleaf.