Into the vault of the saints: the exterior crypts of Saint-Denis in Paris and Saint-Germain in Auxerre

Matthew Ryan Reed
Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses/3036

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Master's Theses by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact gradetd@lsu.edu.
INTO THE VAULT OF THE SAINTS: THE EXTERIOR CRYPTS OF SAINT-DENIS IN PARIS AND SAINT-GERMAIN IN AUXERRE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in The School of Art

By
Matthew Ryan Reed
B.A., University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2006
M.A., Louisiana State University, 2009
May 2011
As virtuous men pass mildly away,
And whispers to their souls, to go,
Whilst some of their sad friends do say,
The breath goes now, and some say, no:

(John Donne, A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning, 1-4 ca. 1633)
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to my advisor, Dr. Matthew Savage, who courageously took on the task of helping me complete this thesis though he arrived after I chose my topic and began my research. His patience and enthusiasm provided the necessary elements for me to overcome losing my original committee due to retirement and relocation. I must also thank Dr. Mark Zucker and Dr. Justin Walsh for honoring me as members of my committee. Their vast knowledge in art and architecture has inspired me during my years as a graduate student at LSU. My gratitude also extends to my first advisor from the Art History Program, Dr. Nicola Camerlenghi, who ignited the spark of curiosity both in the field of Art History and to pursue a topic pertaining to Carolingian exterior crypts. His assistance in my research provided the very essence of this paper’s argument.

Most importantly, I thank my loving family who provided me the strength to complete my Master’s degree after the tragic passing of my mother, Miriam Mestayer Reed, who died December 30, 2009. This thesis is dedicated to her and for all the support she gave me. Finally, I would like to thank my advisor in the History Department, Dr. Maribel Dietz, who encouraged me to pursue a degree in Art History, and continues to selflessly aid me in my academic pursuits.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ............................................................................................................. iii

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................... v

CHAPTER ONE: A SEPARATE ROOM FOR THE DEAD ........................................................ 1


CHAPTER THREE: THE ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN OF THE EXTERIOR CRYPTS OF SAINT DENIS AND SAINT-GERMAIN ............................................................... 34

CHAPTER FOUR: THE EXTERIOR CRYPTS OF SAINT-DENIS AND SAINT-GERMAIN: FUNCTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS ............................................................................. 60

CONCLUSION ..................................................................................................................... 75

BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................................. 77

VITA .................................................................................................................................... 83
**ABSTRACT**

Historians have held the Carolingian rule of Western Europe as a brief strike of light against the dark backdrop of the Medieval period. In this period two structures emerged for the first time in church architecture: the westwork and the exterior crypt. These two structures did not follow models found in Early Christian architecture: they accommodated functions specific to developments and needs that emerged in the context of the Carolingian Empire. Although both hold many opportunities for scholarship, the exterior crypt offers significant insights into developments at the heart of Carolingian liturgy, society, and architectural design. Two of these exterior crypts—those at the abbeys of Saint-Denis in Paris and Saint-Germain in Auxerre—provide the framework for the examination of other exterior crypts that emerged during this period. This thesis will explore these two crypt forms and the functions and references they express.
CHAPTER ONE: A SEPARATE ROOM FOR THE DEAD

Historians have held the Carolingian rule of Western Europe as a brief strike of light against the dark backdrop of the Medieval Period. Under Charlemagne, the Franks pushed their boundaries to cover much of the former Western Roman Empire and began a campaign to reinvigorate Imperial Rome.¹ It is in this period of rule that two structures emerged for the first time in church architecture: the westwork and the exterior crypt. These two structures did not follow models found in Early Christian architecture: they accommodated functions specific to developments and needs that emerged in the context of the Carolingian Empire. Although both hold many opportunities for scholarship, the exterior crypt offers significant insights into developments at the heart of Carolingian liturgy, society, and architectural design. Two of these exterior crypts—those at the abbeys of Saint-Denis in Paris and Saint-Germain in Auxerre—provide the framework for the examination of other exterior crypts that emerged during this imperial revival. Influenced by the Aniane reform of the ninth century, Hilduin, the abbot of Saint-Denis, built a small, simple extension to the eastern end of the ecclesia.² Several years later, Conrad I, the lay-abbot of Saint-Germain, undertook the ambitious construction of a complex exterior crypt to house multiple shrines in a highly decorated interior space. These two structures provide two very different models of exterior crypts: on the one hand, an austere space reserved for monastics, and on the other hand a complex space meant to attract pilgrims. This thesis will explore these two crypt forms and the functions and references they express.

Before addressing these two structures, it is first necessary to define the Carolingian exterior crypt. An exterior crypt, in general, is a structure that extends beyond the boundary of the church as a separate, but connected, space to house the relics of a saint and other honored dead. Some structures are also partially subterranean, allowing visitors to literally descend into the place of the dead. While this new interior space fulfills specific needs of both the imperial or monastic Carolingian church, the development occurred first in the architecture of monastic churches, which “served as laboratories for architectural experiments”. Based on the purpose the extended space was to fulfill, planners developed a variety of structures, from simple square extensions of churches to highly complex structures that allowed space for shrines for saints and burial spaces for the lay and ecclesiastical aristocracy.

Many examples of exterior crypts were intended to accommodate more than just the remains of the saint: some include altars, as well as any decorative programs donated in honor of the church or saint. The walls show frescos depicting scenes of martyrdom or an image of the deceased. Pilgrims desiring the intervention of the saint donated precious objects such as tapestries or gold and silver. Unfortunately, many of these structures fell into ruin, and donations were lost over the years. Little evidence for original forms exists in the standing remains. Art historians must, therefore, consult both archeological evidence and descriptions from surviving primary sources. Despite the paucity of evidence, enough remains to allow speculation that the Carolingian exterior crypt developed not as a simple addition to the *Ecclesia*, but as a complex space with its own specific functions that were then integrated within the superstructure of the church.4

---

4 The *Ecclesia* is a term used by scholars such as Dana Polancihka to refer to the sacred interior space of the church that involved the physical setting around the high altar. The term *ecclesia*
Ultimately, this paper will examine several issues in the exploration of the exterior crypts at Saint-Denis and Saint-Germain. One issue that will be discussed is the placement of the exterior crypt within the broader context of Christian architecture. The structures as developed in the Carolingian period do not have early Christian models for their attached spaces that yet remain spatially separate from the Ecclesia, thus allowing for the burial of honored dead and altars for liturgical celebrations in their commemoration. Other factors to be investigated are the identities of those buried in these new structures and the relationship of these individuals to the development of the new interior space. Are they laymen and –women, or members of the clergy? Does the purpose of the construction of the exterior crypt affect its design? Does the design of the crypt reflect the motives of the individual who commissioned the structure? In discussing these issues, both physical and anecdotal evidence will need to be called on.

The limited physical and anecdotal evidence for the Carolingian exterior crypt may explain the lack of scholarship on the subject. Scholars such as Charles McClendon acknowledge that “the smaller scale and often fragmentary nature of these remains tend to discourage research,” leaving the innovations of the early medieval period unappreciated.\(^5\) Though exterior crypts have only recently come under new scholarly scrutiny, art historians and archeologists have examined the development of Carolingian architecture. Richard Krautheimer examined the innovations of the Carolingian period as a Germanic reference to either imperial Rome or Byzantium with Old Saint Peter’s of Rome and San Vitale of Ravenna as the key models for the

---

new architecture. This research reflected largely on the superficial form of the structure and did not consider the ritual functions that may have precipitated innovation.

Werner Jacobsen, in his article “Saints’ Tombs in Frankish Tomb Architecture” from 1997, considered the placement of the crypt and the reflections on the monastic uses of the crypt’s placement in the church. He argued that the presence or absence of a crypt may correspond with the community’s participation in the rituals of the church. A church may contain a crypt only accessible to the monastic community, or may be open completely to the large numbers of pilgrims of the increasingly popular cult of the saints.

More recent scholarship has examined the form and function of the crypt and its importance to the church and community as a whole. John Crook followed the growing popularity of the cult of the saints in western medieval Europe, and how that specific phenomenon contributed to the development of church crypts. This survey continued the argument advanced by Krautheimer that the structures follow precedents set in Roman and Early Christian architecture. This thesis argues that, although the basic structure may have been modeled on structures observed from Roman and Byzantine remains in the West, the motivation and function of these new additions to the Carolingian churches were uniquely innovative in Western European architecture.

Archeological excavations have also contributed to our understanding of the forms. For the Abbey of Saint-Denis, Sumner Crosby, who began his excavations after World War II, provided over forty years of excavation notes detailing most of the medieval and Gothic

---

components of the church. His book *The Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis*, reworked shortly before his death in 1982, remains the premier archeological investigation co used by historians of medieval art. The Abbey of Saint-Germain in Auxerre, conversely, has seen new excavations led by Christian Sapin of Lyon University in France. His team has produced models of the structure from different periods and has examined not only the physical remains of the site, but also the literary evidence referencing the decoration of the space throughout the structure’s history.

Continuing from such evidence, this thesis will explore two specific exterior crypts that illustrate the two models of crypt design used by other abbeys. The earliest, Saint-Denis, follows an austere plan of a nave with two side aisles, terminated by an apse. Constructed under the direction of Hilduin, an abbot who had a complex relationship with Emperor Louis the Pious, it reflects a movement influenced by the teachings of Benedict of Aniane known as the Aniane Reform. Sumner Crosby and McClendon speculate that Hilduin modeled this crypt on a fourth-century addition to Old St. Peter’s used as a mausoleum for Sextus Probus. Models of Saint-Denis, however, show that the crypt was part of a monastic plan that allowed the monks of Saint-Denis direct access to the crypt. This concept influenced the design of many exterior crypts, such as those of the abbeys of Werden (ca. 850) and Saint-Philibert de Grandlieu (ca. 836). The basic architectural concept and the separation of space reflected privileges the monastics had vis-à-vis the lay community.

---

11 Sextus Probus was a prominent Roman who commissioned a mausoleum behind the apse of Old Saint Peter’s. McClendon, *Origins of Medieval Architecture*, pp. 175-76.
The exterior crypt at Saint-Germain of Auxerre provides an example of an abbey enticing communal activity and visitation through a very complex structure. Commissioned by the lay abbot, Conrad I, uncle to Charles the Bald, the exterior crypt enlarged the eastern end of the church and contained an octagonal sanctuary with a central altar extending beyond the confessio. The confessio containing the body of Saint-Germain was also flanked by shrines containing other relics acquired by the abbey; these shrines were also decorated with frescos and tapestries. Churches such as Saint-Pierre in Flavigny (864-878) used this structure as a model for a new exterior crypt when the abbey acquired the remains of St. Regina.12

The crypts at Saint-Denis and Saint-Germain not only served as the only models other churches followed; but they were very influential as concepts for creating a distinct space for the honored dead that was attached to the Ecclesia but that did not encroach on the space of the Ecclesia proper. Chapter Two will explore earlier examples of church crypts in order to place the exterior crypts of Saint-Denis and Saint-Germain in context. The chapter will examine some of the unique opportunities a crypt afforded a church, and the social and political elements that enabled the development of the innovative structure. Chapter Three will describe the architecture of the two crypts in terms of constructional methods, spatial arrangement and decoration. This formal analysis will serve as a basis for discussing similar designs and construction techniques employed at other Carolingian abbeys in order to create similar spaces. Chapter Four will examine the functional aspects of the crypts, examining both the rituals that took place within these extended areas of the church and how the architecture visually communicated the concept of a sacred space. Also, Chapter Four will examine the ways in which the complex relationships among westwork, Ecclesia, and exterior crypt were perceived within the society. This thesis will

12 Ibid., p. 182.
therefore not only provide a detailed analysis of the construction and function of the exterior crypts of Saint-Denis and Saint-Germain, but it will place these innovative structures in the perspective of being one of the most significant contributions of the Carolingian Empire to the development of ecclesiastical architectural design.

Before examining the design and function of the exterior crypts of Saint-Denis and Saint-Germain, we must first place the concept of the exterior crypt within the historical context of crypt development in Western Europe. By the ninth century, the crypt had become an integral part of the church architecture in the West, largely due to the influence of the Cult of the Saints.¹ The veneration of those proven to be in special providence with God created the impetus for building planners to enable access by pilgrims to the resting place of a saint.² This cultural phenomenon, therefore, was essential for the development of the exterior crypt. This chapter will emphasize the historical phenomena that drove the emergence of the exterior crypts of Saint-Denis and Saint-Germain, and identify the proper significance of the exterior crypt in the context of Western European crypt development.

To understand the growing significance of the crypt, one must first understand the developing popularity of the Cult of the Saints. The explosion of crypts and churches dedicated to saints in the Middle Ages directly correlates with the rising popularity of the Cult of the Saints.³ As a phenomenon, the Cult of the Saints extolled the physical remains of an honored Christian, considering the fragments as a link between Heaven and Earth.⁴ The earliest example of this consideration comes from an epistle preserved by Eusebius of Caeserea concerning the remains of St. Polycarp. The congregation viewed the martyr’s remains as being “more valuable

¹ Crook, Architecture and the Cult of the Saints, p. 22.
² Ibid., pp. 16-17.
than precious stones and purer than wrought gold, and laid them in a fitting place.”

Though early Christian society focused on the spirit and viewed the body as a simple, flawed vessel, early Christians began to place value on the temporal remains of the early martyrs. The powers society attributed to these remains gave rise to a desire to mark their location for pilgrimage and later to enhance the “sacredness” of a church. During the Carolingian period, remains of early Roman martyrs were moved north to the far reaches of Western Christendom. These relics recreated a sacred site by proxy. Pilgrims no longer needed to make the difficult and dangerous journey to Rome: the saint’s relics brought Rome to the pilgrim. Without the growing popularity of the Cult of the Saints, the construction of separate spaces for the dead within a church would not have been necessitated, and the physical bodies of Christian martyrs would have remained largely uncelebrated north of the Alps.

The earliest church with a crypt was old St. Peter’s Basilica, commissioned by Constantine around 320 (Figure 1). The large basilica replaced a memorial for a pilgrim site believed to be the resting place of St. Peter from 160 and served as a complex structure of

---

5 Eusebius of Caesarea, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine* translated and edited by Geoffery Williamson (New York: Penguin, 1989), chapter, 3 lines 114-115; Crook provided a date for this around 155 AD, contemporaneous with the memorial constructed to mark Peter’s grave ca 160, *Architecture and the Cult of the Saints*, p. 10.
Figure 1: Plan of old St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, commissioned by Constantine, 330
(after Krautheimer)
imperial Christian propaganda (Figure 2). Remarkably, one of the earliest examples of a church commissioned by an emperor in Rome placed the tomb of St. Peter as the focal point. The saint’s resting place was, and still is, emphasized by the presence of a baldachin, a vertical architectural feature that represents a tent (Figure 3). This feature marks a separate space within the interior of the church. Between the years 590 and 604, Pope Gregory the Great moved the altar to position it above the resting place of Peter, thus creating a vertical axis extending from the Apostle’s tomb to the place where the Eucharist was celebrated and reinforcing the role of ecclesiastical authority in the liturgy (Figure 4). At the same time, the new sanctuary created a barrier between the crypt and the surrounding space: controlled access to the Saint’s remains was provided by a fenestrella through which pilgrims could view the saint’s tomb. Historians term this crypt that mirrors the apse of the church an “annular crypt”.

The semi-circular structure allows for processional viewing of the contents of the crypt for those fortunate enough to descend into the lower structure. Gregory of Tours provided a detailed description of how a petitioner may address the interred apostle. He wrote:

> Whoever wishes to pray comes to the top of the tomb after unlocking the railings that surround the spot; a small opening is exposed and the person inserts his head in the opening and requests whatever is necessary…But if someone wished to take away a blessed relic, he weighs a little piece of cloth on a pair of scales and

---

14 McClendon, “The History of Saint Peter’s” p. 54.
15 Ibid.
Figure 2: Original memoria for St. Peter in Rome, 160 (after Krautheimer)
Figure 3: Original crypt in old St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, 330 (after Krautheimer)
Figure 4: Renovation of the crypt in old St. Peter's Basilica in Rome by Gregory the Great, ca. 590-604 (after Krautheimer)
lowers it into [the tomb]; then he keeps vigils, fasts, and earnestly prays that the power of the apostle will assist his piety.\textsuperscript{16}

He further recounted that the physical weight of the cloth would increase, allowing the petitioner to know that the Divine had soaked into the cloth.\textsuperscript{17} The clergy did not limit the contact with the saint to the cloth, however, for members of the elite held the special privilege of being able to sleep inside the tomb for purposes of miraculous healing or propitious dreaming.\textsuperscript{18} The remains, however, were guarded by the clergy: famously even Justinian, at the time heir to the imperial Byzantine throne, was denied a fragment of the Apostle’s body.\textsuperscript{19} St. Peter’s presence sealed the legitimacy of the Basilica as a focal point of Christianity. Clearly, the remains of St. Peter marked the conceptual foundation of the fourth-century Basilica.

The physical site of old St. Peter’s in Rome offers further insight into the early influence that a saint had on the community. When the memoria was discovered, it was also found that the tomb was surrounded by early Christian burials that seemingly were clinging to the Saint’s corporal remains so as to gain spiritual grace in the afterlife.\textsuperscript{20} This desire to be buried with the Saint did not end with the construction of the Basilica, as many Christians sought to have their

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, p. 46.
\textsuperscript{19} Peter Brown, \textit{The Cult of the Saints}, p. 88.
\textsuperscript{20} Ancient law did not allow for the dead to be buried with the city walls. The focus for Christian society moved outside the typical areas of Classical Rome to the catacombs and cemeteries beyond the city. Communities that adopted these burial traditions in Western Europe also experienced a similar shift where burial sites outside the community became sites of spiritual significance. The slow process of erecting churches within the walls of cities, however, brought about an “urbanization of the dead.” See Geary, \textit{Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages}, p. 166; Peter Brown, \textit{The Body and Society}, p. 7; and Paul Binski, \textit{Medieval Death: Ritual and Representaion} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 11 and 12.
final resting place near St. Peter.\textsuperscript{21} The community, therefore, considered the site to be sacred, with the body of St. Peter marking the exact spot of Heaven’s intercession on Earth to benefit both the living and the dead. The building existed as a complex entity, providing a direct connection to Heaven, a physical structure to mark a sacred spot, and a favored burial ground for the elite.

Another imperially commissioned church in Rome, San Paolo fuori le mura of ca. 400, followed a plan similar to that of old St. Peter’s, yet it established its own variation of a basilica (Figure 5).\textsuperscript{22} As with St. Peter’s tomb, early Christians in Rome marked St. Paul’s burial site with a memoria. Under the commission of Constantine’s son, a large basilica replaced the small dedication.\textsuperscript{23} Krautheimer emphasized the functional similarity of old St. Peter’s to the new structure as “providing space for large crowds of pilgrims to attend services and venerate the tomb, as well as space for burials.”\textsuperscript{24} In order to establish a symbolic correlation to Constantine’s church, San Paolo fuori le mura has similar dimensions as old St. Peter’s.\textsuperscript{25} The structure’s interior organization, however, differed in that the separation of the nave from the transept was accentuated through the use of triumphal arch, and that it incorporated a crypt directly below the altar more than two hundred years before Pope Gregory had the altar in Old St. Peter’s moved.\textsuperscript{26} In spite of these and other, minor, stylistic variations (such as the separation of the aisles from

\textsuperscript{21} McClendon, “The History of Saint Peter’s” p. 50.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Krautheimer, \textit{Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture}, p. 65
Figure 5: Plan of San Paolo fuori le mura in Rome, ca. 400
the nave by columns supporting arcades rather than a flat entablature), the emphasis at San Paolo fuori le mura remained the same by stressing the presence of the physical remains of a popular saint.

Similar transformations of the resting places of saints took place in pre-Carolingian Gaul, as exemplified by the Church of Saint-Martin of Tours. As was the case with St. Peter’s early veneration, St. Martin’s followers marked his grave initially with a small \textit{memoria}. This structure, however, could not accommodate the number of pilgrims seeking healing and guidance from the Saint. Bishop Perpetuus responded to this demand by constructing a church 900 m² in size and translating the remains behind the church’s altar (Figure 6). As at St. Peter’s, pilgrims regarded the structure as a holy site because of the presence of St. Martin within the walls. A large stone, donated by Bishop Euphronius, marked St. Martin’s exact location behind the altar (Figure 7). There is, however, no evidence that suggests the structure housed other tombs. Instead, the monks altered the church again by placing a wooden screen in front of the tomb so that lay- and clergymen could venerate the saint in a space separate from the community attending Mass. Pilgrims seeking healing, such as Gregory of Tours in 563, could remain in the atrium and view the site of the Saint’s burial, which was indicated by lamps lit and tended by the monks. Just as the engineers of old St. Peter’s emphasized the tomb via the vertical element of

\begin{itemize}
  \item 27 Ibid., p. 64.
  \item 29 Ibid.
  \item 30 Ibid.
  \item 31 Ibid.
  \item 32 Ibid, p.1109.
  \item 33 Ibid; and Gregory of Tours, \textit{The Glory of the Martyrs}, p. 1.
\end{itemize}
Figure 6: Conceptual plan of Perpetuus’ Church of Saint-Martin in Tours, ca. 470 (based on speculative drawing by Conant)
Figure 7: Conceptual drawing of the position of the altar to the tomb of St. Martin in Perpetuus’ church, ca. 470 (after Jacobsen)
the baldachin, the monks of St. Martin’s Church in Tours provided a large stone, wooden screen, and candles to mark the significant space within the structure. These buildings existed only to mark the physical presence of the saint, and without his relics the structure lacked the tangible link with Heaven that drew the hoards of pilgrims.

Many communities in Gaul proceeded with significant caution in incorporating a crypt within a church. Similar to Rome itself, throughout Gaul tradition dictated that the dead be buried outside the walls of a community. Only after confirming several miracles over the site of a specific grave—usually that of a popular bishop or abbot—would a church leader commission a church to house the remains of a saint. These churches were traditionally expanded to incorporate the burial site, which led to the development of several different designs that emphasized in various ways the placement of the grave in relation to the church. During the Merovingian period, however, crypts became an integral aspect in the conception of the interior space of churches. Designs followed the church of Saint-Martin in Tours by placing the crypt behind the altar. The abbey church of Fulda, for instance, contained an elaborate crypt beneath a raised platform for the altar. As at old St. Peter’s, a fenestrella was placed on the same vertical axis in line with the altar, thus creating an ascending line from the Saint, to the site of the celebration of the Mass, to Heaven. The crypt became an essential part of the Merovingian church, establishing a link between the Saint and liturgy that the congregation could physically see.

35 Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages*, p. 170.
A major transition in the organization of this concept in church architecture occurred with the rise of the Carolingians. This transition has been characterized by Crook as a “radical change in architecture” influenced by the ruling dynasty’s inherent need to establish a visual link to Rome and the Papacy.\(^{38}\) Before Charlemagne, the Merovingian kings represented the will of the Divine on Earth.\(^{39}\) As Moreira has asserted, “[i]n early medieval Gaul spiritual and temporal authority went hand in hand.”\(^{40}\) This link between spiritual and temporal authority was maintained; Carolingian rulers nevertheless depended on the role of the Pope as interpreter of the will of God. Pepin the Short’s ascension to the throne in 751 directly tied the Carolingian dynasty to the Pope and Rome.\(^{41}\) This link drove the Carolingian rulers to adopt Roman liturgical and architectural traditions, even if they were filtered through a Germanic interpretation.\(^{42}\) The Carolingians could no longer rely on a divine lineage; their legitimacy relied on the anointing hands of the Pope and on a visual link with the Church in Rome.

The church of Saint-Denis in Paris stood as the initial attempt to incorporate the Roman Liturgy in Gaul and to represent the tie with Rome. Due to the many renovations that occurred in the eighth, ninth and thirteenth centuries, the original structure made of limestone and mud brick no longer exists. Rebuilding of Saint-Denis under the Carolingians between 754 and 775 placed emphasis on the special relationship of Rome and Gaul, and saw a move away from Merovingian building traditions employed during the first phase of construction between 630 and 654.\(^{43}\) The


\(^{41}\) Schutz, *The Carolingians in Central Europe*, p.40.

\(^{42}\) Ibid, p. 23.

Figure 8: Floor plan of the different stages of remodeling for the Abbey of Saint-Denis. The center portion represents Fulrad’s commissioned church with an apse at both the eastern and western facades. (After Conant)
renovated building incorporated an apse on each end of the church symbolizing the link between the Pope and Carolingian king (Figure 8).\textsuperscript{44} The Gallic tradition dictated a church oriented from east to west, yet Latin tradition oriented the church from west to east.\textsuperscript{45} By incorporating an apse at both the western and eastern ends of the church, Saint-Denis represented the marriage of these two traditions; yet it also gave precedent to the Latin design by placing the high altar at the eastern end of the church. In a further reference to St. Peter’s, in 775 engineers working under the direction of Fulrad also incorporated an annular crypt to house the many relics translated from Rome (Figure 9).\textsuperscript{46} Burial traditions at Saint-Denis also resembled those at old St. Peter’s in that honored laymen, such as Pepin the Short, were provided a grave within the church.\textsuperscript{47} Unlike earlier Merovingian churches such as Saint-Martin, which placed emphasis on the site of the Saint’s burial, Carolingian churches were more complex in that they provided both a resting place for a saint and an architectural reference to the new link to Rome.

Under the Carolingians, innovative crypt designs continued to provide a Roman reference without necessarily following the design of old St. Peter’s annular crypt. Hilduin, the archbishop who would later commission the construction of Saint-Denis’ exterior crypt, constructed a crypt for the church of Saint-Médrad in Soissons in 826 that showed in its architecture evidence of influence from the catacombs he had visited on an earlier mission to Rome to claim the relics of SS. Sebastian and Gregory (Figure 10).\textsuperscript{48} This structure provided a small corridor for pilgrims to

\textsuperscript{45} Allan Doig, \textit{Liturgy and Architecture From the Early Church to the Middle Ages} (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2008) p.112.
\textsuperscript{47} Crosby, \textit{The Abbey of Saint-Denis}, p. 119.
\textsuperscript{48} Sanderson, “The Crypt with Parallel Cells” p. 22; and Crosby, \textit{The Abbey of Saint-Denis}, p. 73.
Figure 9: Annular crypt in Saint-Denis by Fulrad, 775
Figure 10: Plan of the crypt in Saint-Mérad in Soissons, 826 (after Conant)
enter and three separate chambers that terminated in a flat wall. Sanderson regards this cramped structure as a complex prototype that Hilduin would simplify in the three-chambered exterior crypt at Saint-Denis.\textsuperscript{49} Saint-Médrad in Soissons provides a prime example that references to Rome were not confined to allusions to Saint Peter’s Basilica, but could also be extended to other Roman sites, including the early Christian catacombs.

The greatest change in Carolingian architectural concepts occurred under Charlemagne in 813 with the \textit{Concilium Cabillonense}. Before this law, there was no standard directing where and how an individual could be buried within the church. At abbeys and churches, individuals were buried under the floor or in great sarcophagi anywhere within the area owned by the \textit{ecclesia}, a practice that sometimes obstructed the procession of the liturgy or communal worship. Addressing this problem, the \textit{Concilium Cabillonense} stated that “Christians are not to be buried within the walls of the church, unless they are the holiest of men”.\textsuperscript{50} This law effectively and dramatically altered Carolingian society and the organization of church architecture, as clergy and wealthy laity were no longer guaranteed the possibility of having a grave in close proximity to a saint.\textsuperscript{51} This single law provides an important impetus for the emergence of the exterior crypt, and it also provides some insight into how Carolingian society viewed the interior space of a church. When Conrad I, uncle to Charles the Bald and lay abbot of the Abbey of Auxerre, embarked on remodeling the church at the Abbey of Auxerre, instead of excavating beneath the apse, he chose to expand the building beyond the apse by erecting a large, complex, external crypt that accommodated shrines and an altar (Figure 11). In apparent defiance of the capitulary

\textsuperscript{49} Sanderson, “The Crypt with Parallel Cells” p. 23.
\textsuperscript{50} “Ut mortui in eccelsia non sepeliantur, nisi episcopi aut abbates vel fideles et boni presbiteri,,” in Polanichka, p. 104.
Figure 11: Plan of the crypt in Saint-Germain in Auxerre; solid portions represent existing archeological remains from the Carolingian period, 841-859 (after McClendon)
enacted almost thirty years earlier, this structure also provided burial space for distinguished people (although not for saints). The importance that the capitulary had in altering Carolingian church architecture cannot be overemphasized, for it provided the innovative impulse for designers to modify the very essence of the church by producing a complex structure with multiple spaces of separate significance.

Churches with relics placed under the altar or within the actual structure of the church, however, continued to exist. Einhard’s churches at Steinbach and Seligenstadt constructed after the capitulary do not show exterior crypts; they housed relics only within crypts under the nave and apse of the churches (Figs. 12 and 13). The abbey church of St. Gall in Switzerland, constructed between 830 and 835, also held to the tradition of burying a saint under the altar (Figure 14). The emergence of the exterior crypt and the numerous examples built after the promulgation of the Concilium Cabillonense raise questions concerning how individual churches addressed the law in terms of their architecture, and thus how interior church space changed during the Carolingian Period.

In conclusion, the Carolingian period saw a dramatic shift in church architectural concepts. Beginning with Pepin in 750, the architecture of churches took on distinct Roman references in an attempt to establish a link between the Carolingian monarchy and the Papacy, as evidenced in the reconstruction of Saint-Denis and Einhard’s churches in the ninth century. Architectural practices further changed with the promulgation of the Concilium Cabillonense, which provided the spark for designers to conceive of a kind of crypt that was attached but nevertheless spatially segregated from the church proper. The exterior crypt allowed designers to conform to the law while at the same time providing space for members of the community to be

Figure 12: Plan of church of Saints Marcellinus and Peter with dotted lines signifying the crypts, Steinbach, Germany, 827 (after Conant)
Figure 13: Plan of church of Saints Marcellinus and Peter, Seligenstadt, Germany, 827 (after McClendon)
Figure 14: Plan of St. Gall, Switzerland, ca. 830-835 (after Jacobsen)
buried in close proximity to a saint. In short, through legal and political necessity, church
designers and builders developed a complex architectural solution that was unique to Carolingian
Europe. The next chapter will explore the constructional, design and decorative elements that
enabled exterior crypts to exist as separate spaces that nevertheless were inherent parts of the
church.

The previous chapter placed the exterior crypts of Saint-Denis of Paris and Saint-Germain of Auxerre within their specific historical contexts. These unique structures emerged under exceptional circumstances in which the forms of art and architecture sought to reference the buildings of imperial Christian Rome, yet at the same time were prevented by law from continuing the Early Christian (and Roman) practice of burying laity in the church itself. The crypts of Saint-Denis and Saint-Auxerre, therefore, expanded the confines of the church, yet existed as separate interior spaces. Only by considering the space of the crypt as a separate space could the exterior crypt comply with the Concilium Cabillonense of 813, thus providing a space for a fortunate group of people to be buried near a saint. This chapter explores the constructional and decorative design solutions of the two crypts. It endeavors to examine the inspiration for the architecture and decorative programs that distinguished this space as an area separate from the Ecclesia within the structure of the church.

Before examining the construction of Hilduin’s exterior crypt, the renovation of the Abbey of Saint-Denis by Hilduin’s predecessor, Fulrad, must be examined. The renovation and expansion of the Abbey of Saint-Denis were inseparable from the political environment of Gaul in the eighth century. Fulrad, the abbot of Saint-Denis from 749 to 784, played an important role in securing Pepin the Short as King of the Franks. Pepin chose the abbey as the setting for Pope

---

2 Fulrad spoke to Pope Zacharias in 749 for Pepin and asked the famous question “whether it was good or not that the kings of the Franks wield no power.” See The Royal Frankish Annals in Carolingian Chronicles: The Royal Frankish Annals and Nithard’s Histories, translated by Bernhard Walter Scholz and Barbara Rogers (University of Michigan, 1972) p. 36; McKitterick, Charlemagne, p. 46; and Crosby, The Abbey of Saint-Denis, p.93.
Stephen II’s crowning him and his two sons, establishing a new royal dynasty in Gaul.\(^3\) In 834, Louis the Pious acknowledged the political significance of the abbey and visited Saint-Denis where he was re-crowned.\(^4\) These political acts make clear that the abbey existed as the linchpin for the Carolingian Dynasty, ensuring the next generation’s legitimacy. The renovation of Saint-Denis is therefore inherently tied to the concepts the Carolingian dynasty used to legitimize itself.

Archeologists and art historians know little about the church that existed before the Carolingian renovation of 775 under Fulrad. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Dagobert embellished the fifth-century church erected by Genevieve during his reign in 630.\(^5\) These documents also reveal that the Parisians built the structure out of rubble, sand, and chalk.\(^6\) Still, the structure completely vanished with the Carolingian renovation in 775 and later alterations under Abbot Suger in the twelfth century. The Carolingian obliteration of the old structure, however, epitomized the need of the new rulers to transform the Merovingian Kingdom into a new, Roman-inspired Carolingian realm. The Merovingian structure had served as the royal burial abbey, and the Caroligian renovation sought to give the building a new design with new materials in an attempt to separate Saint-Denis from the earlier dynasty.\(^7\) The symbolic anointment by the Pope would not have had meaning, however, if the Carolingians did not create

\(^3\) Crosby, *The Abbey of Saint-Denis*, p. 77.
\(^5\) Crosby, *The Abbey of Saint-Denis*, p. 72.
\(^6\) Ibid, p. 81.
specific, visual links with Rome. Reconstruct, therefore, strictly followed specific Constantinian models.

In the rebuilding of Saint-Denis, the Carolingian builders used limestone and a rough, sand-based mortar that has a “reddish hue”. This mortar has almost completely deteriorated over the centuries, yet it produced a stronger edifice than the previous rubble and chalk structure. The masons carved rough-shaped blocks from limestone with chisels instead of masonry saws; thus these artisans adopted the Roman concept of block-and-mortar construction similar to opus vittatum, but they used a simpler process to manufacture a new result (Figure 15). The rough surface of the chiseled block provided, however, a good surface for plaster and paint. Crosby’s analysis of plaster fragments found in portions of the eighth-century section of Saint-Denis is careful not to identify them as Carolingian since “Suger tells us he repainted the walls of the old church”. Although we do not have the specific evidence of the design of the wall surface decoration at Saint-Denis, we do have fragments of plaster that indicate the walls were covered to conceal the rough blocks.

In its architectural design, the new abbey of Saint-Denis in the eighth century resembled earlier churches that had been funded imperially. Fulrad modeled the structure on churches such as old St. Peter’s Basilica and San Paolo fuori le mura as a basilica with a transept that

---

10 Cosby, *The Abbey of Saint-Denis*, p. 131
11 Ibid.
Figure 15: Brick work of Carolingian remains found in Saint-Denis, ca. 832
terminated in an apse. In his study of the building, Crosby argues that the apse was polygonal, but that it also resembled the Rotunda of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and the polygonal structure of San Vitale in Ravenna—all imperially funded, early Christian structures (Figures. 16 and 17).\(^\text{14}\) The building of Saint-Denis brought Rome to Gaul as a physical manifestation of the legitimacy of the new Carolingian Dynasty.

When Hilduin became the abbot of Saint-Denis in 814, he introduced a focus on simplicity and the Benedictine Rule. This reform movement known as the Aniane Reform shunned ostentation and pomp, which were viewed as distracting from the \textit{opus Dei}.

\(^\text{15}\) Although Louis the Pious admired the Aniane Reform, Hilduin fell out of favor with the king of Aquitaine because of his support of Lothar I’s revolt, and was subsequently forced into exile.\(^\text{16}\) During that period, Hilduin led the abbey of Saint-Médard in Soissons and commissioned the three-chambered crypt beneath the altar.\(^\text{17}\) Hilduin’s following of the Aniane Reform directly affected the construction of the crypt in Soissons in 826 and the exterior crypt in 832. Both crypts are

\(^{14}\) Benedict of Aniane, originally Vitiza of Narbonnais, spent a majority of his life reforming the rules of monastic life. He wrote the supplement to the \textit{Haduanum} in 815, and was appointed by King Louis of Aquitaine as head of the monasteries of the realm. His core emphasis for monastic reform was that “monks are to be separate from the busy life of the world, and are to work together in common, to let nothing come before \textit{opus Dei}…” See Andrew Louth, \textit{Greek East and Latin West: The Church, AD 681-1071} (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 2007) p. 104;

\(^{15}\) James Clark provides a good definition for \textit{opus Dei}: “The service of the Lord to which every monk was called under his vocation and for which he and his fellows came together to form—in the words of the founder—a school.” See James Clark, \textit{The Culture of Medieval English Monasticism} (Rochester, New York: Boydell Press, 2007) p. 7; and Louth, \textit{Greek East and Latin West}, pp. 102-104, for further explanation of Benedict of Aniane’s specific reflections on how to promote such a life style in Frankish monasteries.


Figure 16: Ground plan of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem; arrow points to structure of interest, fourth-century (after Conant)
Figure 17: Plan of San Vitale in Ravenna, ca. 548
simple in construction, with interior spaces that suggest a lack of ostentatious decoration. Although construction used a higher quality mortar than Fulrad’s reconstruction of Saint-Denis, the use of basic rough-hewn ashlers on a rubble foundation continued. This evidence shows that builders had become more knowledgeable in masonry techniques, yet did not experiment with different cutting and shaping methods.\textsuperscript{18} It is not known whether the walls were covered in plaster and painted. Due to the significance of the abbey of Saint-Denis, patrons like Louis the Pious may have made donations to the new addition; however, there is a total lack of anecdotal and physical evidence. The influence of the Aniane Reform, however, suggests a focus on functionality rather than presentation.

The structure was linked to the western end of the church by passageways. Although sealed by later restoration campaigns, the presence of arches where the old western wall stood, since they correspond to the barrel vaults of the north and south cells, provides evidence of two entranceways to the crypt.\textsuperscript{19} Crosby argues that the addition of the exterior crypt did not change the structure of the apse—it existed as a separate structure with its own foundation and floor level.\textsuperscript{20} The structure had solid walls pierced by windows providing a specified visual perspective of the cells. Michael Wyss’s conceptual model includes a southern entrance linking the crypt directly to the abbey’s dormitory. Although archeological evidence establishes that the crypt incorporated barrel vaulting, there is not adequate physical and anecdotal data to establish the true height and roofing of the structure. One can, however, establish that the floor of the crypt

\textsuperscript{18} Crosby, \textit{The Abbey of Saint-Denis}, p. 173; and Crosby, “A Carolingian Pavement at Saint-Denis,” p. 42.
\textsuperscript{19} Crosby, \textit{The Abbey of Saint-Denis}, p. 174; and Crook, \textit{Architectural Setting for the Cult of the Saints}, p. 147.
\textsuperscript{20} Crosby, \textit{The Abbey of Saint-Denis}, p. 173.
was below the floor level of the basilica due to the remains of stairs that descended below the eighth-century floor level.

In the previous chapter, we saw that Hilduin’s inspiration for the crypt very likely came from the catacombs in Rome that he had visited, but that the design was considerably abstract, with a longitudinal structure of three cells and with the central cell terminating in an apse (Figure 18). Each cell contained an altar: one dedicated to Saint John; the central one dedicated to the Virgin; and the other dedicated to All Saints. The focus followed the *opus Dei* for monks to have a separate space for strict, uninterrupted prayer. Although scholars such as Charles McClendon have argued that the structure could have been derived from the seventh-century mausoleum of Sextus Probus that protruded from the apse, there are many differences that must be highlighted (Figure 19). The exterior crypt in Saint-Denis was divided into three chambers that are structurally and ritually isolated from each other, unlike the mausoleum of Sextus Probus, which served only one ritualistic purpose. Another key difference is that the exterior crypt in Saint-Denis encompassed the apse extending from the transept at a five-degree angle. The crypt envelopes the lower portion of the apse and links the structure to the dormitories (Figure 20). The similarities between the mausoleum of Sextus Probus and the exterior crypt end with their most basic structure—a longitudinal encasement terminated by an apse. The exterior crypt of the Abbey of Saint-Denis was a unique structure that physically extended the interior space of the

---


Figure 18: Exterior crypt commissioned by Hilduin at Saint-Denis, ca. 832 (after McClendon)
Figure 19: Detail of plan drawn by sixteenth-century architect Tiberio Alfarano on old Saint Peter’s Basilica highlighting the mausoleum of Sextus Probus built ca. 400.
church, linked the dormitory to the church, yet did not distract from the main sacred space of the
curch of Saint-Denis.

Due to the popularity of this design within the ecclesiastical community, several abbeys
adopted a similar, simplified exterior crypt. The original exterior crypt of Corvey, constructed in
the middle of the ninth century, consisted of a single chamber that was placed lower than the
main church’s floor level and that terminated in an apse (Figure 21). 24 This structure extended
five meters beyond the original structure and housed the newly acquired relics donated by
Hilduin. 25 As did Saint-Denis, the abbey already had an interior crypt beneath the altar in which
the relics of the abbey’s patron saint were kept. Through the influence of Hilduin’s donation, the
crypt’s simple vaulted structure mimicked the realm’s most significant abbey. In addition to
Corvey and Saint-Denis, a small church, Werden, also produced a simple exterior crypt
consisting of a single, rectangular cell (Figure 22). There is a striking difference in that Abbot
Altfriend commissioned the enlargement of the eastern section of the church in order to
incorporate the tomb of the abbey’s founder, St. Liudger, which lay just outside the eastern
apse. 26 The rectangular cell existed as a designated area for the abbey’s monks to bury their
abbots. 27 Werden, therefore, provides a good example for an abbot commissioning an addition to
a church that existed as a separate space for the burial of a prominent member of society without
coming into conflict with the stipulations of the Concilium Cabillonense of 813.

Although the Aniane Reformation was promoted by highly influential people such as
Hilduin, it did not completely dominate the Carolingian realm. Several churches, including

26 McClendon, Origin of Medieval Architecture, p. 177; and Crook, Architectural Setting for the
Cult of the Saints, p. 103.
27 Crook, Architectural Setting for the Cult of the Saints, p. 103.
Figure 20: Model of the Abbey of Saint-Denis with exterior crypt and dormitories (after Michael Wyss)
Figure 21: Plan of the Abbey of Corvey, ca. 822-844 (after McClendon)
Figure 22: Floor plan of the Abbey of Werden, ca. 850 (after McClendon)
Saint-Germain in Auxerre, in fact evidence a reaction against the movement by including extravagant structures such as exterior crypts. Commissioned in 841 by Count Conrad I, uncle of Charles the Bald, Saint-Germain represents one of the most complex exterior crypts produced in Carolingian Europe (Figure 23). The structure consisted of two levels, a “lower and upper crypt,” that were consecrated in separate rituals in 865.\(^{28}\) Although reconstruction in the twelfth century destroyed the upper crypt, archeologists and art historians have uncovered portions of the lower crypt and portions of the Carolingian foundations of the exterior crypt.

The Saint-Germain crypt included a *confessio* flanked by two chapels with a central corridor that terminated in a centralized, polygonal space. The stone sarcophagus of St. Germain rests on an arch between two piers within the confessional. McClendon and Crook have argued that the sarcophagus was moved to that position, and that it originally may have stood at the center of the four piers to allow for circulation around the lower crypt (Figure 24).\(^{29}\) A preserved floor mosaic at the center of the *confessio* shows an example referred to by Cynthia Hahn as a “carpet” that may mark the designated spot for an individual to view the original resting place of the Saint (Figure 25).\(^{30}\) The chapels on either side of the *confessio* were dedicated to St. Stephen and St. Lawrence respectively and contain remnants of frescos depicting their martyrdoms (Figs. 26 and 27). Through donations from Charles the Bald and other members of Carolingian royalty, the crypt was adorned with precious metal objects and textiles.\(^{31}\)

\(^{28}\) Ibid; and McClendon, *Origin of Medieval Architecture*, p. 178.


\(^{31}\) Hahn, “Seeing and Believing” p.1102.
Figure 23: Conjectural plan of the exterior crypt of Saint-Germain with identification of known features (after Hahn)
Figure 24: Photo of the present location of St. Germain's sarcophagus
Figure 25: Mosaic floor located in front of the original location of St. Germain's sarcophagus, ca. 842
Figure 26: Fresco depicting the martyrdom of St. Stephen from side chapel in the crypt of Saint-Germain, ca. 842
Figure 27: Reconstruction of fresco depicting the martyrdom of St. Lawrence from the side chapel in the crypt of Saint-Germain, ca. 842
The masonry used at the crypt of Saint-Germain in Auxerre provides evidence for the importance Conrad and his wife, Adelaide, placed on creating an elaborate and complex structure. Masons employed barrel and groin vaulting to support the weight of an upper crypt, and stucco hid the rough masonry used to construct the crypt’s columns and capitals, which were taken from Roman and Merovingian ruins and reworked to produce new capitals of Ionic and Corinthian style (Figure 28). The side chapels were outfitted with pilasters made of stucco. Due to the lack of archeological evidence, art historians have not examined other multistoried crypts that may predate Saint-Germain in the West or that may match the crypt’s extravagant interior decoration. The crypt, however, does clearly exhibit a relationship to polygonal and centralized spaces of early Christianity, such as the Rotunda of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and other examples. Foundations mapped by Sapin show evidence of a polygonal structure, although other art historians have hypothesized a rotunda. The innovative impulse in Saint-Germain’s exterior crypt can be seen in the development of polygonal chapels with multiple corridors in order to produce a complex interior space as an addition to the eastern end of the abbey’s church.

The church of Saint-Pierre in Flavigny follows a similar, though simplified, design. The extension of the church allowed for three fenestellae in the eastern apse for the community to view the relics of St. Regina (Figure 29). The confessio was at the same level as the nave of the church. The presence of a hall confessio terminating in a hexagonal chapel flanked by two side structures suggests a strong influence from the exterior crypt of Saint-Germain. There is no indication, however, that an altar stood in this exterior crypt as in Saint-Germain.

---

32 Sapin, “Saint-Germain of Auxerre,” p. 3; and Hahn, “Seeing and Believing,” pp. 1101-1102  
33 Sapin, “Saint-Germain of Auxerre,” p. 3.  
34 McClendon, Origin of Medieval Architecture, p. 183; and Crook, Architectural Setting for the Cult of Saints, pp. 145-146.
Figure 28: Examples of reworked capitals in the crypt of Saint-Germain referencing both Corinthian and Ionic designs, ca. 842
Figure 29: Plan of the exterior crypt for the Abbey of Saint-Pierre in Flavigny, ca. 864 (after McClendon)
Other churches, such as the two built by Einhard, also evidence a reaction to the Aniane reform; nevertheless, the crypts of these churches show a different approach. Einhard’s church in Steinbach, constructed to house relics translated from Rome, contained a complex cruciform crypt that spanned the width of the transept, portions of the nave, and most of the central apse. Each end of the crypt terminated in a cruciform space transitioned by a groin vault. Both the northern and southern portions of the transept contained a stair corridor for the entire community to use in venerating the relics of SS. Marcellinus and Peter. In his account of the relic translation, however, Einhard tells that the saints did not approve of their new resting place, and that they, therefore, drove him to construct a more traditional crypt in Seligenstadt. The new church followed the model of old Saint Peter’s with a large nave with a transept and a single apse. To meet the requirements set by these angry saints, Seligenstadt contained a single, annular crypt to house their relics. This more “Roman” church placated the saints and they showered their grace over the community of Seligenstadt. At both churches, however, space was designated for tombs for Einhard, though not in the crypt but within the interior of the church. Nevertheless, these two buildings are the exception for an individual who was very influential at the courts of Charlemagne and Louis the Pious. Although Einhard’s churches in Steinbach and Seligenstadt are examples of the continued use of the interior crypt, more churches in the later ninth and early tenth centuries use the exterior crypt design than the interior crypt design.

In the churches of Saint-Denis and Saint-Germain, one can see keen structural differences in the conception of their exterior crypts. The exterior crypt in Auxerre uses several types of vault designs to span the various chambers, whereas Saint-Denis employed only three barrel vaults. Hilduin did not commission the use of columns or piers, but promoted three wholly

---

separate spaces linked only by windows. Conrad, in contrast, used several piers and decorations to provide a visual flow and cohesion for the entire structure. While the crypt at Saint-Germain consisted of separate chambers that complemented the theme of the crypt as a whole, the chambers of the exterior crypt at Saint-Denis could stand alone from one another.

In conclusion, the forms of the exterior crypts of Saint-Denis and Saint-Germain highlight two very different architectural solutions that emerged in the Carolingian period. Both crypts used similar stone-and-mortar construction, yet their visual presentations differed greatly. Hilduin, inspired by the Aniane Reform, strove for simplicity and austerity to present a minimal addition to the abbey to be used by the monks and emperor. Conrad, conversely, strove for ostentation, and produced a structure that capitalized on the growing popularity of the Cult of Relics. His structure pushed the boundaries of what can be considered a crypt by the inclusion of both an upper and lower level, whereas the exterior crypt of Saint-Denis provided innovation through its simple and practical design. With so many structures in Carolingian Europe that looked to these abbeys for inspiration, one can see two schools of architecture emerge: one that follows the Aniane Reform and one that reacts to that reform.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE EXTERIOR CRYPTS OF SAINT-DENIS AND SAINT-GERMAIN: FUNCTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

The previous chapter explored the physical structure and decoration of the exterior crypts of Saint-Denis and Saint-Germain. Both crypts used a varietal of limestone from the region held together with an inferior mortar, in a manner emulative of earlier Roman structures; yet the designs of both structures differed greatly. Both crypts also served as models for the construction of exterior crypts at other abbeys and thus had a lasting impact on ecclesiastical architecture. Saint-Germain’s interior was ornate, with the crypt’s architecture divided into several components of different design and purpose, and with walls decorated with fresco painting. Saint-Denis, on the other hand, offered a plainer structure, apparently through the influence of the Aniane Reform. One can, therefore, see these structures as presenting two different models for the Carolingian exterior crypt. Tied closely with the development of these two distinct models is also the discernment of different functional elements for each crypt. In their designs and accessibility, these spaces clearly reflect the interests of different audiences, and thus they accommodate different functions. This chapter will examine functional aspects of these structures and, in so doing, will address the ways in which these crypts were used as alternative spaces for communal worship.

During the Carolingian period, churches incorporated many functions. As a symbolic whole, the interior space represented humanity’s attempt to reconstruct the vision of the celestial Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. Günter Bandmann argued that a medieval building existed aesthetically as an engagement of its inner meaning. This argument is not reliant on the issue of ceremony; spaces within the structure become removed from earthly existence and enter into

---

1 Polanichka, p. 83.
heavenly significance.\textsuperscript{3} An altar or a relic marked an important location within a church: this location was independent from the surrounding interior space in both its sacred significance and its function; nevertheless this location did not necessarily have physical borders.\textsuperscript{4} In her research, Dana Polanichka has examined the relationship between the high altar in Carolingian structures and the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem (Figure 30).\textsuperscript{5} Similar to the Holy of Holy’s in the Temple of Solomon, the high altar stood over a reliquary or crypt that represented the holiest space within the church from which sacred grace emanated to fill the interior space of the structure.\textsuperscript{6} While an interesting explanation of the meaning of ecclesiastical space, this contention nevertheless does not explain the complex interior arrangement of Carolingian churches that contained more than one altar and housed multiple relics in a variety of spaces.

The space within the westwork, for example, served a distinctly different function and ritualistic significance than did the main body of the church; yet it, too, contained an altar for the celebration of the Mass.\textsuperscript{7} For instance, as Conant has shown, masses dedicated to the Cult of the Savior were often conducted in the westwork because the verticality of the space reflected the triumph of the Ascension.\textsuperscript{8} The gallery of many westworks, such as that of Saint Riquier, allowed for choirs to sing hymns from a hidden location, thus enhancing the mysterious nature of

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid, pp. 107-108.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid; Brown, \textit{The Cult of the Saints}, p. 73; and McClendon, \textit{The Origins of Medieval Architecture}, p. 142.
\textsuperscript{5} Polanichka, p. 24.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{8} Connant, p. 45.
Figure 30: Conjectural ground plan of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem (© 1998 Son Light Publishers, Ft. Smith, Arkansas)
the Mass. The abbey of Saint-Riquier, in fact, best exemplified a structure housing many sacred spaces by incorporating eleven altars all housing relics (Figure 31). In this configuration, monks could perform different Masses simultaneously within isolated sacred spaces. Carolingian architects applied a similar concept to the exterior crypt. The enclosure offered a new interior space, new in its design and placement, but also equipped with altar(s) and relic(s) and thus designated as sacred space within the church building. Clearly, the interior of the church did not consist of one uniform space; rather it encompassed many separate areas that could exist autonomously, and each contributed to the overarching concept of representing the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.

Different spaces within the church also called for different behaviors, since Carolingian doctrine argued that space could affect a viewer. Hahn emphasized the medieval artist’s and architect’s use of this concept by arguing that “Seeing could be encouraged to forge certain mental and even physical attitudes towards believing.” She goes on to explain that the tone and design of the crypt was crucial in order that the viewer be able to recognize the significance of the space, as “ornament itself was perceived as the mark of the sacred.” Even the restriction or denial of access to a space affected the interpretation of the meaning of that space, as Polanichka has further shown in discussing the prohibition of priests from entering specific spaces. The visual perception of an enclosure or barrier, therefore, was inseparably linked to the overall

---

9 Ibid.
11 Polanichka provides a detailed account of laws that regulated specific behaviors for the atrium and the main body of the church. See Polanichka, pp. 49-57.
12 Hahn, “Seeing and Believing” p. 1104.
13 Ibid, p.1083.
14 Polanichka argues that the prohibition for priests to enter public buildings, such as a tavern, inferred that Carolingian legislators believed that the physical space could affect the priest, not that the space itself was evil. See Polanichka, p. 83.
Figure 31: Plan of Saint-Riquier with location of altars, ca. 799 (after Jacobsen)
function of a structure. This conclusion explains the floor level of the exterior crypt being placed lower than the floor level of the rest of the church as a means to physically direct the visitor down to the area of the dead, thus controlling the audience’s perception of the space through the use of the *fenestrella* and separating corridors.

Before exploring specific functional aspects of the crypts of Saint-Denis and Saint-Germain, it is first necessary to address the reforms in Christian ritual pertaining to death that took place during the Carolingian period. Current scholarship sees the Carolingian era as a unique period during which different elements, “Roman, Visigothic, Irish, Anglo-Saxon, and Gallacian—could interact and influence one another.”15 Frederick Paxton has emphasized the strong role of Mozarabic culture from the Iberian Peninsula in influencing Carolingian society, especially in the way that the Carolingian *ecclesia* presented the sacraments to the community.16 Similarly to the Mozarabic priests, the Frankish clergy’s theological significance lay in the secrecy of sacramental rite. Richard Kieckhefer refers to the spread of the “alienated liturgy of the altar” during this period in Western Europe.17 These multiple influences have led historians to consider the Carolingian era as more of a Christianizing rather than a Romanizing period.18 Rituals involving death and the sick, moreover, represent old Gallacian rituals that Frankish religious leaders strove to preserve.19 Prayers for the dead and commemorative masses from the

---

16 McKitterick, *The Frankish Church*, p. 220; Paxton further explored Mozarabic influences on the Carolingian clergy with the new argument that Benedict of Aniane wrote the Supplement to the *Hadrianium*, rather than Alcuin of York. See Paxton, p. 136.
18 Paxton, McKitterick, and Brown argued that religious reform came more from clerics in the court rather than the kings and emperors of the Carolingian Dynasty. See Paxton, p. 93; McKitterick, *The Frankish Church*, p. 83; and Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, p. 443.
19 Paxton, p. 94.
Supplement to the *Sacramentarium Hadrianum* written by Benedict of Aniane demonstrate Mozarabic and other regional Frankish influences, in addition to the appropriation of Roman Christian traditions. Rituals involving the dead, therefore, are in many ways uniquely Germanic during the Carolingian era: this in turn may account for some of the unique concepts of architectural space that emerged in respect to accommodating rituals involving the dead.

Carolingian reform is also remarkable for its focus on the clergy. McKitterick states that the “uniqueness of the *sacerdotes* as a special class set apart from the rest of the *fideles* was increasingly stressed [in the Carolingian period].” The Mass itself elevated priests not only to spiritual guides, but to actual mediators of God’s will to the community. Under the leadership of the priest, the Mass represented the “unity of Frankish society” and, therefore, claimed central importance in the minds of Frankish Church leaders. The Mass took on visually dramatic tones to emotionally affect the community, especially during Lent. Furthermore, keeping the Liturgy and prayers in Latin may have separated the clergy from the masses, but it also redirected focus to the visual elements of the liturgy and to the physical environment on display in the interior space of the church. Laws within the clergy strictly regulated priests’ wardrobes and the decorations and embellishments a sacred space could contain. The sermon, however, remained in the vernacular and served as “one of the principal vehicles for the instruction of the people”. The sermon served to instruct, and the Liturgy and rituals served as a visual and oral presentation

---

20 Ibid, p. 132.
21 McKitterick, *The Frankish Church*, p. 117.
22 Ibid, pp. 116-117.
23 Ibid, p. 118.
24 McClendon, p. 186.
25 McKitterick, *The Frankish Church*, p. 140.
26 Ibid, p. 81.
of a “sacred mystery”. Frankish churches, however, possessed both didactic and mysterious elements, housing many altars, screens, and illustrations in the form of frescos and mosaics.

McKiterrick provides a good summary the ultimate purpose for such innovation:

The drama of liturgical rites, architectural and pictorial innovation, the demand for material offerings from the people, and the evidence we have for the encouragement of the popular piety, singing and veneration of relics, all suggest that the Frankish clergy did believe that they should make the effort to ensure that the laity were comprehending and even delighted participants in the offices of the church.

The Carolingian reform, therefore, brought new significance to the layout and decoration of the church reinforcing the rituals that took place there, and this effort extended to exterior crypts.

The two models presented in this thesis—the exterior crypt of Saint-Denis and Saint-Germain—offer different approaches to expressing the functions of the Carolingian reform. The exterior crypt in Saint-Denis provided a secluded space within the church for the monks to separate themselves from the community. With a corridor that directly linked the dormitory to the crypt, monks could enter the crypt without passing through the main interior space of Saint-Denis. Anecdotal evidence also provides a description that bronze doors covered the two entrances at the eastern wall of the church. This allowed for monks to transfer relics from the main crypt into the exterior crypt if the abbey came under siege, as it did in the ninth century. The crypt, therefore, could act as a vault to protect the abbey’s most valuable objects in times of threat. Crosby’s extensive study goes so far as to conclude that “the primary function of the

---

27 Ibid, p. 142.
28 Hahn, pp. 1083-1084; and Polanichka, p. 127.
29 McKiterrick, The Frankish Church, p. 146.
31 The Abbey of Saint-Denis came under siege by the Normans in the ninth century. See Crosby, The Abbey of Saint-Denis, p. 177
addition to Saint-Denis was to protect a large number of relics.”

The three altars also allowed monks to hold multiple masses within the crypt, thus allowing for multiple sacred spaces for dedication masses or prayers following the Opus Dei. Hilduin explains the liturgical function of the crypt:

And by common assent, we have established that eight monks of this holy community, following one another by turns, should execute all the time in this [crypt] the day and night Office in the Roman manner.

No evidence of decoration or painting exists within the crypt, but it is known that at the synod of Paris in 825 Hilduin supported the iconoclastic arguments of Emperor Michael II of Byzantium. His support of iconoclasm suggests that Hilduin may not have supported a decorative program of images in the crypt. Thus, the secrecy of ritual and sacramental rites were emphasized in this structure, and the concept upheld by the Carolingian rulers that physically separated the ecclesia from the community was embodied in the structure, secured behind the bronze doors of the eastern wall.

The exterior crypt of Saint-Denis is further unique in that there is no archeological or anecdotal evidence that would suggest that the ecclesia allowed anyone to be buried there. This remarkable fact, however, does not dismiss the designation of the space as a crypt, as it housed many of the abbey’s relics. Hilduin himself referred to the structure as a crypt, and although some scholars struggle with the term, many concede to accepting the original designation of the

---

33 Ibid; and McClendon, The Origins of Medieval Architecture, p. 175.
building as applied by Hilduin.\(^{37}\) Other crypts modeled after Saint-Denis, such as that at Werden, were built primarily as burial spaces for abbots, and thus did not possess an altar. The crypt at Corvey, which was also modeled on the crypt at Saint-Denis and which served as space for the burial of abbots, also does not provide evidence for the presence of an altar. These crypts, however, served as relic vaults for their respective abbeys; likewise, they were physically separate from the main body of the church, and entrance to the the space was regulated. With the exception of laity who received the abbot’s permission, only members of the monastery were allowed to enter any of these crypts.\(^{38}\) The exterior crypts modeled on the crypt at Saint-Denis served, therefore, as a separate sacred space exclusively for the members of the monastery, and also as a secured structure to house the most valued possessions of the abbey.

Though the exterior crypt of Saint-Germain contained many separate chambers, there is little evidence to suggest that the structure accentuated a separation from the community. The presence of multiple chapels and corridors indicates an interior space that allowed for processional flow throughout the crypt. A pilgrim could enter from one entrance, follow the main corridor around the entire crypt, observe every chapel, and leave from the opposite stairway. Crook labels this type of crypt a “shrine crypt” that was designed to satisfy the needs of the growing Cult of Saints.\(^{39}\) Though historians regard Saint-Denis as the main distributor of relics throughout Carolingian Europe, Hilduin’s exterior crypt does not reflect the growing popularity of the Cult as does the multi-level, free-flowing crypt of Saint-Germain. Conrad did express, however, a preference to the Germanic martyr by placing the chapel dedicated to Saint-Germain

\(^{37}\) Crosby and many other scholars conceded that Hilduin used the word *cryptam* and Abbot Suger later used the word *cripta* in describing the structure. See Ibid, p. 175.

\(^{38}\) Polanichka, p. 49.

\(^{39}\) Crook, p. 142.
on a higher platform than the two side crypts of St. Lawrence and St. Stephen (Figure 32).\textsuperscript{40} The hierarchy of position extended to the abbots’ graves placed to the side of St. Germain, and to those above the side chapels as well. Artists produced portrait frescos of the abbots buried next to St. Germain in order to express the legacy present in the office (Figure 33).\textsuperscript{41} The frescos showing the martyrdoms of St. Lawrence and St. Stephen emphasized the continuing legacy of major martyrs with the death of St. Germain.\textsuperscript{42} The separation of the ecclesia was not expressed by the separation of the space from the community, but rather by the fact that monks and abbots (and not the lay community) could be buried in the confessio and corridors. The structure, therefore, encouraged visitation but expressed separation through privileged burial and through the legacy of Saint-Germain in the frescos of the abbots.

To better understand the differences in the functions of the exterior crypts of Saint-Denis and Saint-Germain, one must also understand the condition of the bishoprics and abbeys of the period. Though the Carolingian Reform pushed for uniformity throughout the realm, bishops and abbots possessed a significant amount of autonomy within their lands.\textsuperscript{43} The ecclesiastical portion of society existed separate from the laity, with its own laws and duties.\textsuperscript{44} The clergy, therefore, presented a parallel hierarchy to the laity with its leaders answering to Rome as well as to the emperor. As mediators between God and society, the clergy stood as supreme interpreters of law within the realm. Some church leaders were even able to mint their own coins.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{40} McClendon, p. 180.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Brown, \textit{The Rise of Western Christendom}, p. 443; and MiKitterick, \textit{The Frankish Church}, p. 64-65.
\textsuperscript{44} Brown, \textit{The Rise of Western Christendom}, p. 444.
\textsuperscript{45} MiKitterick, \textit{The Frankish Church}, pp. 67-8.
Figure 32: Reconstruction of the *confessio* and side chapel of the exterior crypt of Saint-Germain illustrating the difference in floor level (C. Castillo)
Figure 33: Fresco of two abbots in the confessio of the exterior crypt in Saint-Germain, ca. 842
Although independent within their own lands, Hilduin and Conrad’s relationship to the emperor encouraged the development of different architectural forms for different purposes. Hilduin, as Bishop of Saint-Denis and advisor to Louis the Pious, encouraged an architectural form that was meant to be used as a model for other building projects and to be spread throughout the realm symbolizing unity. Conrad, in contrast, as a lay abbot and uncle to Charles the Bald, encouraged a design specifically for the abbey of Saint-Germain. His exterior crypt also provided a compromise, allowing esteemed individuals of the abbey to be buried within the sanctity of the church, but not within the major communal area of the building. As a lay abbot, he was not interested in furthering the aims of a particular movement as Hilduin was; rather, his interests lay more in the display of the wealth and influence of the abbey to the pilgrims who visited it. The autonomy of the abbots and their individual motivations and interests led to architectural innovation at the various abbeys and churches. The designs and decoration of exterior crypts, therefore, reflected the bishop or abbot’s vision for the exterior crypt.

In conclusion, the exterior crypts of Saint-Germain and Saint-Denis served distinct functions that reflected the new reforms of the Church during the Carolingian period. The idea of sacred space during the period emphasized visual elements. Space itself could affect the audience; therefore, everything perceived by the viewer, including a building’s decoration and even its floor level in relation to surrounding structures, had an intentional function. Crypts that followed the model of Saint-Denis expressed many cultural influences that lay at the foundation of the Carolingian Reform, such as the separation of the clergy from the laity and the secret mysteries surrounding the relics housed within the walls of the crypts. This model also provided a space for intense, secluded prayer for the monks of the abbey, as well as a protected environment for the relics during times of invasion. Crypts that followed the model of Saint-
Germain acknowledged the demands brought about by the growing Cult of the Saints and provided a space for the *ecclesia* to be buried without breaking the law set by the *Concilium Cabillonense* of 813. In short, the functional aspects of the Carolingian exterior crypt depended solely on the intentions of the abbot or bishop who commissioned construction.
CONCLUSION

The exterior crypts of Saint-Denis and Saint-Germain are representative of a vibrant period in Christian architecture during which multiple cultural and political influences merged to enable the creation of unique and innovative buildings. The ambitions of Carolingian rulers provided an environment ripe for influences from Roman and early Christian culture interpreted through the eyes of Germanic patrons, artists and builders. These two crypts present two separate models for a uniquely Carolingian architectural achievement. These buildings also illuminate the opposing forces in a growing religious reform that emphasized mystical secrecy and the increasingly popular practice of pilgrimage and relic veneration. Through their distinct forms and functions, the Carolingian exterior crypts are unprecedented structures that represent well one of the most innovative periods in the history of Western Europe.

Without the unique cultural and political environment of the Carolingian period, the development of the exterior crypt would not have been possible. Most significant was the Concilium Cabillonense, enacted in 813, that proscribed the burial of aristocratic laity and ecclesia within the church. This reform drove church leaders to develop a new structural solution that would enable burial separate from the main structure of the church, but still within sanctified space and in proximity to saints’ burials and to relics. The ecclesia’s rise in social status during the period also influenced building practices by placing the clergy in charge of the manner in which members of the laity were allowed to view and access sacred space. A direct result of this desire to control sacred space can be seen in the designs of the exterior crypts at Saint-Denis, Corvey and Werden, where space is specifically reserved for the ecclesia. Crypts such as Saint-Germain and Flavigny, in contrast, respond to another cultural influence, namely to the Cult of the Saints, and incorporate designs that allowed for a procession of pilgrims. These social and
political influences provided the unique environment that enabled the unprecedented innovation of the exterior crypt.

Finally, the exterior crypts of Saint-Denis and Saint-Germain provided two different structural models for other Carolingian abbeys and churches to follow. Saint-Denis provided a simpler model for abbeys, and its influence can be seen in crypt design at Werden and Corvey. The crypts that followed the model set by Hilduin emphasize the new Aniane Reform movement that sought to remove elements that would distract monastics from their duties. Saint-Germain, in contrast, provided a model for an ostentatious presentation of church relics, as well as a space that allowed for prominent members of society to be buried as close as possible to a saint, without however encroaching on the main interior space of the church. Clearly, the development of the exterior crypt marks an important shift in the planning of ecclesiastical architecture. Accompanying this development is a reevaluation of the boundaries and very nature of sacred space. In conclusion, the exterior crypts of Saint-Denis and Saint-Germain mark unique architectural solutions in the process of expanding the limits and redefining the boundaries of sacred space.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES


SCHOLARSHIP


---. *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages.* Ithaca: Cornell University, 1994.


VITA

Matthew Reed was born in Lafayette, Louisiana, in 1983. He graduated from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette with a Bachelors of the Arts degree in history in May, 2006. He was accepted into Graduate Program for history at Louisiana State University in 2006 and studied medieval history under Dr. Maribel Dietz. During his studies in the program, Matthew has represented the Graduate School as a Student Senator and volunteered to assist professors by proctoring exams, tutoring students, and leading undergraduate discussion seminars. His interest in art began when he enrolled in several art history classes and became very interested in the subject. Under the advice of his advisor and with the guidance of Dr. Nicola Camerlenghi, he enrolled into the Art Department after finishing his Master of Arts degree in history in May, 2009. During his studies in the program he has presented a paper as a representative of the art history Department in Louisiana State University’s first Graduate History Conference held by the History Graduate Student Association. He has also been privileged to acquaint himself with many of the department’s professors; including Dr. Matthew Savage, Dr. Mark Zucker, Dr. Justin Walsh and Dr. Marchita Mauck. Matthew is a candidate for a master of the Arts degree in art history for the spring of 2011. He currently resides in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and hopes to pursue a law degree and career that can incorporate his studies.