

# Analysis of “Life of King Louis the Fat” by Abbot Suger

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## ABSTRACT

Through reading the first fourteen chapters of the Medieval biography “Life of King Louis the Fat”, written by Abbot Suger (1081-1151), about the early life of Louis VI from the Capetian Dynasty of France before he was enthroned. We can see a young prince encountering different challenges and gaining new experiences that sparked him to grow. Louis became one of the most famous monarchs in Medieval France through his efforts of making a centralized and powerful kingdom. Louis the Fat’s early age in this biography would be act as an exemplary for all the youths in the royal houses.

**Keywords:** *Suzerain, Centralized Reign, Rise of the Capetian Dynasty.*

## 1. INFORMATION OF THE AUTHOR

Abbot Suger was a historian, an abbot (terminology about a head of a monastery in the Medieval period), a politician in the middle of the Capetian Dynasty (987-1328).

He was sent to the monastery of Saint-Denis at the age of ten (at 1091 AD), where he met one of the future kings of France, Louis the Fat [1]. I believe this is when he got the sense to write the chronicle for Louis since he had been accompanied with him at the young age. At the age of 26(at 1107 AD), he became the Abbot of Saint Denis and was assigned by missions from kings and his own Abbey [2]. According to later historians, Suger have become companions closer to King Louis until the later 1120s [3].

Suger was one of the earliest patrons of innovations for architectures, he made contributions to the origin of the Gothic art. The Abbey Church of St. Denis was one of the representatives of the early form of Gothic art constructed by Suger [4]. Historians have been searching sources on the early Gothic architectures to analyze his view towards kingships. He attended frequent royal acts after 1130, during that period was when he began writing chronicles since he gained sources from the royalties [5]. “Life of King Louis the Fat” is narrated in a perspective from the upper class praising the king’s political and military behaviors and his robust reactions on diplomats with foreign monarchs and nobilities during his younger age, special contributions to the Christian religion and protections to the churches and the lower classes [6]. Such narrations were probably due to the behalf from the

two Capetian royal members (Louis VI and Louis VII) since they had promoted his political status in the upper class. Actually, the narration was not formally based on Suger’s inner thoughts and his own personal subjective, but it made a strong correlation of Suger and the royalist ideologies and marked those aspects distinctively [7]. Later historians discovered that Suger had presented a theory based on his feudal structures in his mind to define the relationship between Medieval lords and monarchs. In other words, he created a pyramid of feudal ties (which reveals the suzerainty) through his writings. Historians have been astonished by his originality and intellectual in creating this innovative theory [8]. In addition, Suger’s works in his field of historian such as “King Louis the Fat” has a strong influence on clergies in the abbey of understanding history which made the monks in Saint Denis to include a taste in history and served as quasi-official chronicles [9].

## 2. HISTORICAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE TEXT

Presumably, Suger began to write the text “Life of King Louis the fat” in the later of the 1130s after king Louis VI’s death when he was a counselor for the Capetian royalists. The text was a biography for the king who had been passed away and was used as a record to the history of royalties in the house of Capet.

We can use the text’s narration to deduce the period when the text was exactly written. To be more precise, the text has revealed a theory based on the author himself: he presented a theory illustrating an ideal feudal structure [10] between French monarchs and aristocrats (ruler or

lords in different regions). This revealed the fact of the instability of Medieval French reign since the Capetian dynasty became the nominal king of France (when Hugh Capet was king of France, since his military power was limited, Count of Auvergne—one of the lords—even offended him and doubted him as being king which illustrates the ignorance of lords to the ruler) [11]. The king was circumscribed by lords of different provinces into small holdings of in the center of modern France immersed with pestilence and disordering anarchies. The rest of the kingdom was splintered into lords and dukes left by the previous Carolingian Dynasty aggregating their own strength in the aspects of military and economy status and became independent to the reign of the monarchs. Some of the aristocrats have gained enough of power to offend the rules of monarchs. For instance, Duke William of Normandy (William the Conqueror of England) had even disobeyed the rules of one of the previous French kings (Phillip I) to gain his own power and conquered England in order to enhance his reign's status over France [12]. France would not be the only example living under such anarchy to the monarchs [13], there was still the Holy Roman Empire, Kingdom of Poland and Kievan Rus. Those countries revealed the characteristic of over autocratic in different regions through a kingdom. King Louis have also realized the problem and began to take precautions such as improving the relationship with the clergies and churches (which would gain public supports since it indicates the king is generous and obedient to gods) or circumscribing the power of nearby aristocrats to the monarch, he was the first king who took actions to maintain a central government ruled by monarchs[14].

This situation of the disintegrating kingdom contributed to Suger's invention of the theory of a more improved relationship between monarchs and lords, he created this in order to achieve a more stabilized kingdom with a centralized monarch. He would think a strong king in the House of Capet like Louis the Fat as a good precursor of the French monarch who began to fight against the over powerful aristocrats and achieve the ideal society where the kingdom became centralized. And of course, his theory worked successfully after the next king's generations (eg. Phillip II made French reign more powerful) [15].

### **3. SUMMARY OF THE TEXT (EARLY LIFE OF KING LOUIS) PAGE1-13**

King Louis the Fat was depicted as a clever child who was hard-working in fights and battles during his childhood which contributed to his strength later as he was king. His youth was with the same custom as Charlemagne the Great and many other great emperors in which he attended the church at Saint Denis and devoted to the Catholic religion. This built up Louis' reverence to the religion and liberality he learnt of being a clergy in

the church during his early age and prolonged his friendship with the other clergies and churches.

In his adolescence, he became bored of hunting and other aristocratic entertainments. Unlike the other boys from noble families, Louis had a strong pursuit of weapons and military. He has youthful vigor which helped him to lead only hundreds of men repelling against the invasion from a powerful monarch, William Rufus, who was skillful in military with thousands of armed troops and had supports from his powerful kingdom—England and Duchy of Normandy. Louis was regarded as a successor and gained the rights to become king when his father passed away.

Louis strived to protect churches and provided needs for them. As nobleman Bouchard de Montmorency attempted to attack Saint Denis, Louis took his army to fight against him and caused threats to the nobleman's territory and other participants attempting to attack the church. Young Louis showed his spirit of bravery and perseverance facing difficulties. During his besiege of one of the noblemen, his army encountered a violent storm and scattered the troops which disturbed the momentum of the whole army, Louis was injured. However, he did not give up for the besiege. Louis then gathered three times the army as original to attack back. The enemy then humbly surrendered to the prince and the battle was appeased. Louis was kind and generous and he soon agreed with peace and cooled his anger and restored his injury.

The young prince sought a royal administration and began to suppress the castles that caused threats to him. He did this in order to stabilize his reign as he was king.

Prince Louis had a strong status in diplomacy. Bohemond, prince of Antioch, came to France to seek marriage with Louis' elder sister—Constance who was a lady with beautiful appearance. Bohemond used his experience and used his gifts and promises which made the marriage to be held successfully. Bohemond inspired lots of people in France to go to worship the Holy Land which built up a good relationship with France. Another example of Louis' diplomacy can be seen through Pope Paschal II's visit to France in order to consult certain problems related to investiture. There Lord Louis and King Phillip encountered threats from emperor Henry of the Holy Roman Empire who was not humble and was impolite to the churches and clergies. It illustrated an intense contrast between the impolite Germans' and the humble French's behaviors to the clergies which indicated to the piousness of Lord Louis and the French to their religion and established a good relationship between the Pope and French monarchs in near future.

As Louis grew up his father became feeble. Louis had magnanimity and never revolt his father during his reign unlike many of the other youths in the noble family betraying their fathers and cheated to get the throne. As

King Phillip passed away, Lord Louis took the throne and became the King of France. Through his youth in building up a good relationship with churches, supports to the weak in the lower class, and positive diplomacy among foreign politicians, King Louis strengthened his reign and became the monarch successfully although some problems had occurred during the process of enthroning and clergies have blamed about this since Louis violated the fruit from the first Frankish King, Clovis, at church of Rheims.

In conclusion, King Louis the Fat gained a prospect of the beginning of prosperity of France in the Middle-Medieval period through his wise decisions and devotions to his own country and citizens during his early-age.

#### 4. TERMINOLOGY OF “LIFE OF KING LOUIS THE FAT”

4.1 abbot:

the head of a monastery in the Medieval Period

4.2. saintly martyrs:

a person who voluntarily suffers death as the penalty of witnessing to and refusing to renounce a religion

4.3. magnanimous:

showing or suggesting a lofty and courageous spirit

4.4. prodigal:

characterized by profuse or wasteful expenditure

4.5. pagan:

a follower of a polytheistic religion

6. prowess:

distinguished bravery

7.pillage:

goods or money obtained illegally

8.oaths:

a solemn usually formal calling upon God or a god to witness to the truth of what one says or to witness that one sincerely intends to do what one says

9.capitulate:

surrender under agreed conditions

4.10 viscount:

a peer who ranks below an earl and above a baron

4.11 suzerain:

a superior feudal lord to whom fealty is due: overlord

4.12 castellan:

a keeper or governor of a castle

4.13 chivalry:

the medieval principles governing knighthood and knightly conduct

4.14 unction:

anointing as part of a religious ceremony or healing ritual

4.15 anathema:

a formal ecclesiastical curse accompanied by excommunication

4.16 countess

A female count who was usually the daughter of previous counts who inherited the reign

#### 5. ARGUMENTATION AND INTERPRETATION

##### 5.1. Interpretation

##### 5.1.1. fruit at church of Rheims

King Louis was accused due to his violate in the fruit at church of Rheims. The fruit was obtained by St. Remigius as he baptized the first Frankish Monarch, Clovis I. Anyone who disrespect the fruit would be struck by perpetual anathema.

##### 5.1.2. towers

Medieval towers are used for defenses, usually with archers on top of it. The towers are usually located at the four angles of the castle. As in the story, where Lord Louis took the castle of Luzarches and placed defenses at the towers.

##### 5.1.3. why Louis was called “Lord Louis” in the text

Lord is the general title for a prince and in Ancient Period there’s no tradition of naming the prince “Prince Louis”. On the other hand, the author called him as “Lord” for a laudatory title due to his great contribution to his kingdom, people and religion, as sometimes people call Jesus: “Lord Jesus”.

##### 5.1.4. difference between an Emperor (Holy Roman Empire) and a King (France)

In chapter X, readers would be confused why Henry of Holy Roman Empire can be named as Emperor but King Phillip (Louis’ father) was named as King. This is because the German King Otto I was crowned as the Roman Emperor in 962 by the Pope John XII due to his help in appeasing the rebellion in Rome. By contrast, because France is far away from Rome and cannot help

the Pope effectively and the French monarchs were not able to elevate as Emperor.

#### *5.1.5. process of enthroning in Medieval Europe (chapter XIV)*

As a prince was enthroned to be the king, the procedure is fulfilled with the coronation from Bishops or the Pope (eg. Coronation of Napoleon I in 1804 by Pope Pius VII) with the holy oil of unction. Then the inheritor would start the thanksgiving and the bishop would replace the secular sword of the monarch with the church's sword and then the monarch could take the crown.

#### *5.1.6. weakening of the Papal reign in the early 11th century*

The power of the Pope over Europe was weakening in the middle Medieval period. In the 1080s, Rome suffered attacks from the Germans and robberies from the Normans of the Sicily and Naples kingdom. After that, the Pope's power was weakened and sometimes would suffer threats from other kingdoms. In Chapter X, Pope Paschal II suffered threats from Emperor Henry. In addition, the excommunication from Pope Paschal did not cause threats to some of the strong Medieval monarchs.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Overall, the text was narrated in a perspective from the upper class to the monarch. The text is not that subjective since it still revealed some of the violent actions (such as invasions) Lord Louis took to impose threats to the lords who disobeyed him. The text was written since Suger had the desire to seek a Frankish Kingdom ruling under a centralized reign by the monarch rather than suzerainty which disintegrates the whole countries' economy and power. Through the narration of Suger, we can find that he sought to achieve a powerful Frankish Kingdom with a strong leader such as King Louis to create a path for all the future Frankish generations to be in a kingdom with peace and harmony with lack of conflicts between different Frankish provinces and that contributed to the first step of creating a modern nationalism of France. It was Suger's positive comments on the king through his contribution and faith to his religion, generosity to the lower classes, resilience and hard work in the field of military, and respect to his father's reign during his youth, made more French citizens to be subjugated by the "good" king and begin to stand with his side to create a centralized kingdom.

From my perspective, in addition, the text was written for education purposes. In other words, Suger wrote the text in order to educate younger royal generations and Louis' youth in the story acted as an exemplary of a hard-

working child with bravery and persistency at the battlefield and had devotions to the churches and the religion. Suger had the desire to seek younger generations with such childhood that is likely to spark their growth and become successful monarchs with contributions to the kingdom and his people which would fix the problem of suzerain in the future. Creation of educational text for the monarchs was frequent in Medieval Period such as the laws written by Alfonso X of Castile: "Las Siete Partidas". This established the laws of monarchs that they should follow in order to become a successful king. In comparison to modern period, we can read biographies of celebrities to learn what sparked their growth in their childhood and made them successful in the future just as the younger princes reading the text written by Abbot Suger to learn the story of Medieval successful monarchs. However, usually we don't see a violent figure in their youth leading army on the battlefield.

As a result, premised on the preceding analysis, I believe the text "Life of King Louis the Fat" was a great contribution by Suger to the Medieval French society and was an exhaustive source of a chronicle of King Louis. It is the suzerainty and the instability of Medieval society that sparked a growth of a young strong spirit to solve such drawbacks and made the author to write the text which is one of the representatives of the crystallization of Medieval wisdom that modern people cannot achieve.

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