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**Payment methods:** personal check or money order made out to “Association Abbaye Royale Saint-Médard de Soissons.” Please include this form, signed and dated, and mail to: ARSMS, 10, rue des Longues Raies, 02200 Soissons.

Thank you for your support!

☐ For tax purposes, I wish to receive a receipt for all gifts exceeding 10 euros.



### Association for the Royal Abbey of Saint Médard in Soissons (ARSMS)

Created in 2016, ARSMS's mission includes the preservation and protection of the site, as well as public outreach and international scientific investigation aimed at deepening understanding of the very significant spiritual, political, and economic roles the Abbey played in the history of medieval France, especially during the Merovingian and Carolingian periods.

**Contact:** [contact@saint-medard-soissons.fr](mailto:contact@saint-medard-soissons.fr)

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02200 Soissons

**Website:** [www.saint-medard-soissons.fr](http://www.saint-medard-soissons.fr)

**At the present time, all site visits must be arranged by appointment with the Tourist Office in Soissons, or with ARSMS.**



## The Royal Abbey of Saint Médard in Soissons



### 1500 Years of History

#### Historical Background

Founded in 560 to house the relics of Saint Médard, bishop of Noyon, this Benedictine Abbey soon became one of the principal spiritual and political centers of early medieval France. Its growth stemmed from numerous royal associations, among them serving as the burial site of Clotaire (d. 561) and Sigebert (d. 575), the son and grandson of Clovis, founder of the Merovingian dynasty. The Abbey also saw the coronation in 751 of Pepin the Short as king of the Franks, inaugurating the Carolingian dynasty that would dominate Europe for 250 years.



Over the next several centuries, the Abbey continued to prosper from royal and papal largesse. In 804, for example, Pope Leo III stayed at Saint-Médard, having celebrated Christmas with Charlemagne at Quierzy. Charlemagne's son Louis the Pious was a frequent visitor; his sons imprisoned him there in 833 during the civil wars over their succession. From 826 on, the Abbey's fame spread throughout Europe, owing to its acquisition of the relics of Sebastian and other saints. The flood of pilgrims come to experience their miraculous benefits prompted the creation of a company of archers to protect the precious reliquaries. This gave rise to the order of Saint Sebastian, patron of archers, whose venerable Soissons chapter is still active.

Saint-Médard's reputation and riches attracted attention from the Vikings and Hungarians, who periodically pillaged the Abbey and the imperial palace. By the turn of the millennium, with the dislocation of the Carolingian Empire, the transfer of royal power to Paris, and the regional struggles among the local feudal lords, the Abbey found itself unable to sustain its former glory.

Nevertheless, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Saint-Médard became an important intellectual center. Under the leadership of Abbot Raoul (1094-1119) and Abbot Geoffroy Cou de Cerf (1119-1131) and in response to the Cluniac Reforms, the monastery was renovated and restructured. In 1131, Pope Innocent II consecrated the new Abbey; in 1210 King Philip Augustus restored the ramparts.

The Hundred Years War and the Wars of Religion brought fresh destruction to the Abbey, especially in 1567 at the hands of the Protestants. Yet it persevered. When, for example, the church dedicated by Innocent II collapsed in 1621, it was speedily rebuilt. The Abbey regained some prestige in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but its days were numbered. The Revolution abolished it and sold the entire complex in 1791 as national property. This irreparable act resulted in the dismantling of nearly all of Saint-Médard's buildings, walls, and gardens, leaving for posterity only a few ruins. Touring them in 1854, the writer Gérard de Nerval was prompted to pronounce the site "a Carolingian Pompeii."

## The Crypt and Royal Mausoleum



Of the extant remains, the crypt is particularly impressive. This features ten chapels linked by a vaulted transverse gallery, which lay beneath the choir area of the 1630 Abbey church. The central chapel contained the relics of Saint Médard, as well as the sarcophagi of the Merovingian kings Clotaire and Sigebert. The crypt also accommodated many other burials and funerary plaques, some of which have been recently excavated.

The semi-circular niches set into the chapel walls originally contained royal statues, colorfully painted and gilded. We have some sense of what these looked like from drawings made in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, as well as from traces of paint on the walls. The pair of niches with Gothic framing once held the statues of Clotaire and Sigebert. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Clotaire statue's head was recovered from the crypt's well.

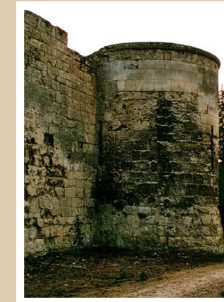
## The Main Entrance

The 16<sup>th</sup>-century bird's eye view of the Abbey, now in the Soissons museum, shows that the main entrance was a veritable small castle, with a drawbridge, ditches, and towers. To safeguard the monks after the Viking attacks of 893, King Eudes ordered the first fortifications of the Abbey, which were expanded over the centuries, but failed to stop the vicissitudes



of war and invasion. After the Wars of Religion, the ditches gradually filled in, and the inhabitants of Soissons began mining the enclosure walls for building materials.

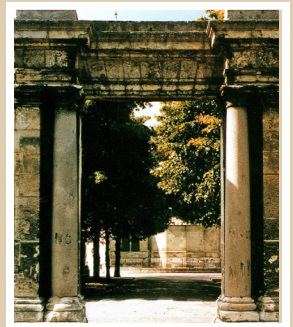
## The Tower "of Abelard"



Tradition has it that one of the towers along the Abbey's north wall served as the prison of the theologian Abelard. Sentenced in 1121 by the Council of Soissons to burn his controversial book on the Trinity, he in fact stayed only a few days in the Abbey before the papal legate ordered him

to return to the Abbey of Saint Denis. Such was Abelard's celebrity that the episode was elaborated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to connect his name forevermore with this tower. Prior to World War I, one might have imagined that the chapel atop it was a prison; this structure was heavily damaged in the war and not rebuilt, giving the tower its present truncated appearance.

## Roman Columns from the Abbey Church



A short distance outside the main entrance may be seen a freestanding portal flanked by classical columns, which likely date back to Soissons's days as a Roman town. At some point, these were re-used in the Abbey church, perhaps to frame an area of special importance. After the Revolution, the pillars were removed and erected in various locations in Soissons, managing to survive the siege and fire of 1814. They ended as part of the entrance to a school, which was destroyed by bombardment in World War I, except for this portal. Today, these granite columns are the sole monumental vestiges of the once-magnificent Abbey church.