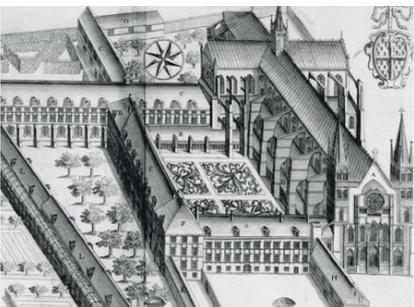


4 THE BENEDICTINES FROM THEIR FIRST SETTLEMENT, AROUND 760, TO OUR TIME



Picture 16 – Bishop Tilpin finds a Benedictine abbey on the tomb of Saint Remi (codex Palatinus Gerpanicus 112 © Heidelberg University Library)



Picture 17 – 17th century plate by Dom Michel Germain showing the Saint-Remi Abbey © BNF



Picture 18 – Anonymous engraving – Coronation of Louis XV (the abbot of Saint Remi bringing the Holy Phial to the cathedral) - 18th century © Fonds Bibliothèque Municipale de Reims

The origins

Immediately after the burial of Saint Remi, the tomb in his sanctuary was considered a venerable pilgrimage site. The fame of Saint Remi was maintained by the aristocratic families of Austrasia and Neustria during the Merovingian era. The city of Rheims perpetuated this memory and its statute of diocese capital. Rheims became an episcopal see under Tilpin (748-795). Rheims was a flourishing city, a key point between the Western part and the Eastern part of the Frank kingdom.

Towards 760, under the reign of Pepin the Brief, Archbishop Tilpin founded a Benedictine abbey on the site of Saint-Remi's tomb. The Benedictines adopted the Rule of Saint Benedict (Benedict of Nursie). Saint Benedict had founded the famous Mount Cassin Abbey towards 529, then he wrote his Rule in the following years (530-550). The abbots of Saint-Remi were given more power and they were responsible for the maintenance and functioning of the church. The development of the Remi cult took up a political role under the Pippinides. To ensure a legitimate lineage, the coronation tradition was reinforced and the figure of Saint Remi was summoned. Each new Carolingian king wanted to be considered as a protector of the Nation, just as Clovis used to be.

Towards 852, Archbishop and Abbot of Saint-Remi Hincmar (806-882) asked for the reconstruction of the edifice where Saint Remi's remains and the holy phial were kept. The prelate was inspired by the figure of the Frankish saint. Remi, "the Frankish apostle" (an expression used by Hincmar in *Vita Remigii* in 882), was a glorious figure on an equal footing with the king. This was the prestige that his successor, Hincmar, hoped to gain.

Until 945, the Saint-Remi abbot was the archbishop of Rheims. After that date, the father superior was elected by the monks; the first elected abbot was Hincmar II (abbacy from 945 to 967).

There were several steps in the building works, one after the other. In 1010, Abbot Airard (abbacy from 1009 to 1048) started an important phase of reconstruction. He had a vision of a very large Roman church, the largest in the Christian world after Saint-Peter of Rome. After 30 years of very hard work, his plans were modified by his successor, Abbot Thierry (abbacy from 1036 to 1048), because they were considered too costly and too ambitious. It is Abbot Herimar (abbacy from 1048 to 1076) who completed the work with the transept and the roof. The abbey, brought to the rank of funerary basilica, was consecrated by Saint Leo IX on October the 2nd 1049.



The organisation of the abbey

Life in the abbey was organised around a large cloister. To the east, was the chapter hall, to the north, the kitchen and the refectory. South of the Abbey, there was a chaplaincy in a chapel that was dedicated to Saint Laurent. The dwelling of the Abbot was to the north of the cloister. The infirmary, with a chapel dedicated to Saint Christopher, was east of the chapter hall. The chapter hall of the abbey is a twelfth-century marvel with its slender columns, its majestic cross vault and its magnificently carved capitals.

When Pierre de Celle became a Saint-Remi abbot in 1162, he took part in the history of the site. Until 1180, this new abbot deeply reorganised the architecture of the abbey church and cloister. The Roman portal was replaced by a gothic-style one. The nave was extended with two vaulted bays. A new choir was erected, a deeper one with five radiating chapels. To this day, we can see the organisation and elevation decided by Pierre de Celle (see chapter 5).

The Grand-Priors

Monastic life, which was flourishing in the twelfth century, declined after the One Hundred Years War. In spite of the work achieved by Pierre de Celle (1162-1180) and his successors, the influence of the site continues to decline. Under Louis XI in 1482, the abbey was subjected to a commendatory abbot and directed by a Grand-Prior; the first of them being Rheims Bishop, Robert de Lenoncourt. Even though the majority of the commendatory abbots neglected the abbey, Robert de Lenoncourt started important works and had a portal erected for the south transept. He also ordered the series of 10 tapestries illustrating the life of Saint Remi that are now on show in the Saint-Remi museum.

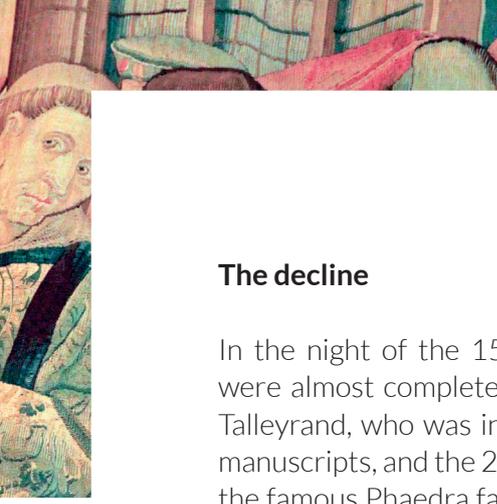
Robert de Lenoncourt crowned King Francis the First on the 25th of January 1515, holding the Holy Phial which had been preciously stored by the abbey. In 1627, Athanse de Mongin started the reform of the Saint-Benedict order. The abbey joined the congregation of Saint-Maur.



Picture 19 – View from Simon Street – photo TD



Picture 20 – The abbey's main courtyard – photo TD



The decline

In the night of the 15th to the 16th of January 1774, the abbey church and the cloister were almost completely reduced to ashes by a terrible fire caused, tradition says, by young Talleyrand, who was in care of the monks, and had forgotten to blow a candle out. The 900 manuscripts, and the 20,000 volumes of the library were lost in the catastrophe – among them the famous Phaedra fables, the cartulary known under the name of “polyptych of Saint Remi”, which had been started by the Archbishop of Rheims, the collection of Capitular Acts and two unpublished histories of the abbey, by Benedictines Dom Égée et Dom Levacher.

On the other hand, the book of “The origins” by Saint Isidore (750), the papal history by Archbishop Hincmar (780), a sacramentary by Saint Gregory (799) and the Hours of Queen Emma, wife of Louis d’Outremer were miraculously spared by the flames. The abbey buildings were reconstructed after the fire, in a more modern style. Architect Louis Duroché refurbished the yard, the flight of stairs and the façade.

On the 13th of February 1790, the Constituent Assembly declared the abolition of monastic vows and the suppression of religious congregations. The clergymen were in 1793. The abbey was then used as military barracks, and was transformed into a military hospital in 1796 until 1816, then into a Hotel-Dieu Hospital from June 1827. It became a civil hospital until the inter-war period. Today, the abbey hosts the Saint-Remi Museum of history and archaeology. The church has become a parochial church, with the title of basilica. The former Benedictine royal abbey and the Basilica were classified as a World Heritage site by Unesco in 1991.



Picture 21 – Detail of the tapestry of the Life of Saint Remi – photo TD