

[Recepción del artículo: 21/07/2022]
[Aceptación del artículo revisado: 24/09/2022]

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN ABBOT SUGER'S REFLECTIONS ON THE MAIN ALTAR OF SAINT-DENIS: COLORS AND GEMS, MATERIALITY AND LIGHT*

EL LENGUAJE FIGURATIVO EN LAS REFLEXIONES DEL ABAD SUGER SOBRE EL ALTAR MAYOR DE SAINT-DENIS: COLORES Y GEMAS, MATERIALIDAD Y LUZ

ALBERTO VIRDIS
Centre for Early Medieval Studies
Masaryk University, Brno
alberto.virdis@gmail.com
ORCID ID: 0000-0003-2862-5670

ABSTRACT

Abbot Suger, in *De Administratione*, invites his readers to consider the precious materials adorning the altar of Saint-Denis from an allegorical perspective. His metaphors encompass the liturgical furnishings of the altar as well as the colors of its gems, stones, and precious metals. Suger also refers to matter and light, and the ascent from what is material towards what is immaterial. The “anagogic” function of polychrome gems, as described by Suger, is rooted in the neoplatonic ideas of pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, whose ideas were also the basis for John Scotus Eriugena's concept of theophany. This article thoroughly analyzes the symbolic and allegorical language in Abbot Suger's writings and reconnects them with the figurative language used in Medieval Latin culture: the typological, encyclopedic, and liturgical allegories, as well as metaphysical pansemiosis. Suger's references to specific theoretical and textual passages in the writings of Eriugena and Hugh of St. Victor will be identified. Finally, an analysis will be made of the altars at Saint-Denis and related liturgical furnishings, using Suger's descriptions, other written and figurative sources, and the few material fragments preserved. Specific attention will be paid to the allegorical interpretation of colors and precious materials, including the cryptic *materia saphirorum*.

KEYWORDS: Suger, Saint-Denis, altars, *crista*, allegory, Scotus Eriugena, Hugh of St. Victor

RESUMEN

El abad Suger, en su *De Administratione*, invita a sus lectores a considerar los materiales preciosos que adornan el altar de Saint-Denis desde una perspectiva alegórica. Sus metáforas

abarcan el mobiliario litúrgico del altar, así como los colores de sus gemas, piedras y metales preciosos. Suger también se refiere a la materia y a la luz, y al ascenso desde lo material hacia lo inmaterial. La función «anagógica» de las gemas policromadas, tal y como la describe Suger, hunde sus raíces en las ideas neoplatónicas del pseudo-Dionisio Areopagita, cuyas ideas fueron también la base del concepto de teofanía de Juan Escoto Eriúgena. Este artículo analiza a fondo el lenguaje simbólico y alegórico de los escritos del abad Suger y los reconecta con el lenguaje figurativo utilizado en la cultura latina medieval: las alegorías tipológicas, enciclopédicas y litúrgicas, así como la pansemiosis metafísica. Se identificarán las referencias de Suger a pasajes teóricos y textuales concretos de los escritos de Eriúgena y de Hugo de San Víctor. Por último, se analizarán los altares de Saint-Denis y el mobiliario litúrgico relacionado con ellos, a partir de las descripciones de Suger, de otras fuentes escritas y figurativas y de los escasos fragmentos materiales conservados. Se prestará especial atención a la interpretación alegórica de los colores y los materiales preciosos, incluida la críptica *materia saphirorum*.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Suger, Saint-Denis, altares, crista, alegoría, Escoto Eriúgena, Hugo de San Víctor

Anyone investigating the liturgical furnishing at Saint-Denis at the time of Abbot Suger has to deal with a vast critical literature produced over many decades.¹ Despite this mass, some recent contributions show that the debate around Suger's writings and work is still very much alive. The scholarly discussion is highly polarized around the long-debated question of whether or not Suger's writings reflect the metaphysics of light elaborated by pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in the sixth century and conveyed to the West through the translation and commentaries of John Scotus Eriúgena in the ninth century and Hugh of St. Victor in the twelfth.

* This article was written within the project "MSCAfellow4@MUNI" (No. CZ.02.2.69/0.0/0.0/20_079/0017045). I sincerely thank Adriano Hundhausen for his help with the linguistic revision of the text.

¹ It is virtually impossible to account, in one bibliographical note, for the entire critical debate on Saint-Denis at the time of Suger; most of the studies are structured around a number of macro-themes, often intersecting with each other: the architectural innovations in the choir and the façade, the stained glass windows, the metaphysics of light, Suger's writings and his role as patron, the liturgical furnishings, the abbey treasury. I will mention here only the most important milestones in the critical historiography: E. MALE, *L'art religieux du XIII^e siècle en France: étude sur les origines de l'iconographie du moyen âge*, Paris, 1922 (see esp. ch. 5, entirely devoted to Suger and Saint-Denis); S. M. CROSBY, *The Abbey of St. Denis, 475-1122*, I, New Haven, 1942; E. PANOFKY, *Abbot Suger. On the Abbey Church of St-Denis and its Art Treasures*, Princeton 1946 (2nd ed., G. PANOFKY-SOERGER ed., Princeton 1979); H. SEDLMAYR, *Die Entstehung der Kathedrale*, Zürich, 1950; M. AUBERT, *Suger*, Paris, 1950; O. VON SIMSON, *The Gothic Cathedral: the Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order*, London, 1956 (2nd ed. revised and augmented, New York, 1962); S. M. CROSBY (ed.), *The Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis in the Time of Abbot Suger (1122-1151)*, (Catalogue of the exhibition, 1981), New York, 1981; S. M. CROSBY, *The Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis from its Beginnings to the Death of Suger, 475-1151*, ed. by P. Z. BLUM, New Haven, 1987; C. RUDOLPH, *Artistic Change at Saint-Denis. Abbot Suger's Program and the Early Twelfth-Century Controversy over Art*, Princeton, 1990; A. SPEER, G. BINDING (eds.), *Abt Suger von Saint-Denis. Ausgewählte Schriften*, Darmstadt, 2000. For a comprehensive summary of the critical debate see J. BOGDANOVIĆ, "Rethinking the Dionysian Legacy in Medieval Architecture: East and West", in F. IVANOVIĆ (ed.), *Dionysius the Areopagite Between Orthodoxy and Heresy*, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2011, pp. 109-134; see also FRANCESCA DELL'ACQUA, "L'auctoritas dello pseudo-Dionigi e Sugerio di Saint-Denis", *Studi medievali* 3 s. LV/1 (2014), pp. 189-213. For bibliography devoted to other more specific topics related to Suger and Saint-Denis, see the following footnotes.

Over the last thirty years, many scholars, especially some writing in German, have denied the existence of such a relationship,² alleging that it is nothing more than part of a forced interpretation devised by Erwin Panofsky in his famous 1946 essay *"On the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and its art treasures"*.³ Panofsky's position, dubbed the "Panofskyan paradigm," has been decisively rejected and, in its place, a different interpretation of Suger's writings and inscriptions for the basilica has been suggested, one which excludes any neoplatonic metaphysics and instead focuses on the Scriptures, especially the Gospel of John.

The most prominent of these German-language scholars is Andreas Speer, who has devoted several publications to the subject and re-centered the interpretation of Suger's texts around the liturgy, rather than around theological or philosophical ideas. According to Speer, Suger was guided only by liturgical needs in his renovation, reconstruction, and decoration of the basilica and in the commissioning of its liturgical furnishings.⁴

² The critical debate on the relationship between Suger and the neoplatonic metaphysics of light has been largely oriented around Panofsky's theses; these found wide acceptance early on, as shown by the studies of SEDLMAYR, *Die Entstehung der Kathedrale* and von SIMSON, *Gothic Cathedral*. The connection between the thought of pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, John Scotus Eriugena, and Suger was later deepened by W. BEIERWALTES, *"Negati affirmatio. Welt als Metapher. Zur Grundlegung einer mittelalterlichen Ästhetik durch Johannes Scotus Eriugena"*, *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* LXXXIII (1976), pp. 237-265; P. ROREM, *Pseudo-Dionysius: a Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to their Influence*. Oxford/New York, 1993, H. KESSLER, "The Function of *Vitrum Vestitum* and the Use of *Materia Saphirorum* in Suger's Saint-Denis", in J. BASCHET, *L'image. Fonctions et usages des images dans l'Occident medieval*, Paris, 1996, pp. 179-203 (repr. in idem, *Spiritual Seeing*, Philadelphia, 2000, pp. 190-205). The links between Suger and Hugh of St. Victor have been investigated by D. POIREL, *L'abbé Suger, le manifeste gothique de Saint-Denis et la pensée victorine*, Turnhout 2001. The Panofskian theses, on the other hand, have been the subject of a new critical discussion since the 1980s. See for instance J. GAGE, "Gothic Glass: Two Aspects of a Dionysian Aesthetics", *Art History* v/1 (1982), pp. 36-58; P. KIDSON, "Panofsky, Suger and Saint Denis", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, I (1987), pp. 1-17. Since the 1990s, in particular, they have been decisively rejected by several German scholars: Cristoph Marksches, Bruno Reudenbach, Martin Büchsel, and especially Andreas Speer (see nn. 4-5). See, for instance, B. REUDENBACH, "Panofsky et Suger de Saint Denis", *Histoire et théories de l'art*, II (1994), pp. 137-150; M. BÜCHEL, "Die von Abt Suger verfaßten Inschriften: gibt es eine ästhetische Theorie der Skulptur im Mittelalter?", in H. BECK, K. HENGESVOSS-DÜRKOP, G. KAMP (eds.), *Studien zur Geschichte der europäischen Skulptur im 12./13. Jahrhundert*, vol.1, Frankfurt am Main, 1994, pp. 57-73; C. MARKSCHIES, M. HENGEL, *Gibt es eine "Theologie der gotischen Kathedrale"? Nochmals: Suger von Saint-Denis und Sankt Dionys vom Areopag*, Heidelberg, 1995; SPEER, BINDING, *Abt Suger*; M. BÜCHEL, "Licht und Metaphysik in der Gotik: noch einmal zu Suger von Saint-Denis", in E. BADSTÜBNER, G. EIMER (eds.), *Licht und Farbe in der mittelalterlichen Backsteinarchitektur des südlichen Ostseeraums*, Berlin, 2005, pp. 24-37. The theses of these German scholars have not found full acceptance. For a re-assessment and an overview of the critical debate see E.S. MAINOLDI, "L'abate Sugerio e i suoi orizzonti mimetici: San Dionigi (non l'Areopagita) tra Saint-Denis e Hagia Sophia sullo sfondo della rottura tra Oriente e Occidente cristiani", *Studi Medievali*, s. III, LVIII/1 (2017), pp. 23-43; see also DELL'ACQUA, "L'auctoritas dello pseudo-Dionigi".

³ PANOFSKY, *Abbot Suger*.

⁴ "It was for the sake of liturgy that Suger tried to restore the damaged parts of the abbey church, to enlarge and reconstruct others", see A. SPEER, "Art as liturgy: Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis and the Question of Medieval Aesthetics", in J. HAMESSE, L. BOYLE (eds.), *Roma magistra mundi. Itineraria culturae medievalis*, Louvain-la-neuve 1998, pp. 855-875, p. 860. See also SPEER, "Lux mirabilis et continua. Ammerkungen zum Verhältnis von mittelalterlicher Lichtspekulation und gotischer Glaskunst", in H. WESTERMANN-ANGERHAUSEN, C. HAGNAU (eds.), *Himmelslicht. Europäische Glasmalerei im Jahrhundert des Kölner Dombaues (1248-1349)*, (Catalogue of the exhibition 1998-1999), Köln, 1998, pp. 89-94; SPEER, BINDING, *Abt Suger*, esp. pp. 13-66.

Likewise, Speer denies any possible interest in aesthetic issues on the part of Suger, whom he differentiates from learned abbots such as Bernard of Clairvaux or William of St. Thierry. Moreover, Speer considers it meaningless to look for a theoretical foundation in a medieval work of art, and finally, he claims that one cannot properly speak of a “medieval aesthetic” before the age of Baumgarten and Kant,⁵ even in the manner of the so-called “implicit aesthetics” employed by Edgar de Bruyne, Władysław Tatarkiewicz, and Umberto Eco.⁶ For Speer, this *modus operandi*, especially as employed by de Bruyne and Eco, is an “abstraction without any historical basis”.⁷ The radical nature of these claims has rekindled the critical debate about Suger over the past two decades, since many scholars have not accepted Speer’s revisionist position.⁸

There is no doubt that Speer’s work has prompted a reconsideration of Suger’s role as a patron, offering other possible interpretations of the abbot’s writings. This is extremely important for the art-historical reconstruction of such an important medieval artistic monument as the abbey of Saint-Denis.

However, these positions do not fully account for the speculative language used by Suger in his reflections on the decoration of his abbey church and, especially, the liturgical furnishings of the high altar (principally found in *De Administratione*). Furthermore, not all his references to the theology of light can be explained away by a quote from the Holy Scriptures, pace Speer and other German scholars.⁹

In this article I will analyze the figurative language of *De Administratione* on the basis of modern theories of symbolic and allegorical language in the Middle Ages, especially the theses elaborated by Umberto Eco.¹⁰ In particular, I intend to investigate the figurative and allegorical

⁵ A. SPEER, “Is there a theology of the gothic cathedral? A re-reading of Abbot Suger’s writings on the abbey church of Saint-Denis”, in J. HAMBURGER, A.-M. BOUCHÉ (eds.), 2006, pp. 65-83.

⁶ E. DE BRUYNE, *Etudes d’esthétique médiévale*, Bruges, 1946 (2nd. ed. with a pref. by M.de Gandillac, Paris, 1998); W. TATARKIEWICZ, *Medieval aesthetics*, Warsaw/Paris, 1970; U. ECO, *Arte e bellezza nell’estetica medievale*, Milan, 1987. More recently A.M.S. Salvestrini, has offered an in-depth overview of the most recent aesthetological theses formulated in favor of a pre-modern aesthetics. See A.M.S. SALVESTRINI, “Sull’estetica medievale dopo Eco. Un percorso storiografico”, *Lebenswelt*, 14 (2019), pp. 1-22.

⁷ SPEER, “Is there a theology?” p. 78. In a later article dedicated to the topic of medieval aesthetics, Speer argues more widely and modifies his earlier positions addressing the issues related to the possibility of talking about medieval aesthetics. He states that there was an aesthetic in the Middle Ages, but it is crucial that we not invoke “the trans-historical categories of art and beauty.” According to Speer, thus, the question of medieval aesthetics goes beyond the distinction between philosophy and theology and, as concerns the centrality of the anagogical dimension, in which the sensible refers back to the intelligible, “it can be observed that the aesthetic dimension is to be understood in a comprehensive and expanded manner, which goes beyond the borders defined by a concept of a philosophical aesthetics that tries to find its object in the intersection of art and beauty”; A. SPEER, “Aesthetics”, in J. MARENBOON (ed.), *Medieval Philosophy*, Oxford, 2012, pp. 661-684.

⁸ DELL’ACQUA, “L’auctoritas dello pseudo-Dionigi”; E.S. MAINOLDI, “L’abate Sugerio e i suoi orizzonti mimetici: San Dionigi (non l’Areopagita) tra Saint-Denis e Hagia Sophia sullo sfondo della rottura tra Oriente e Occidente cristiani”, *Studi Medievali*, s. III, LVIII/1 (2017), pp. 23-43, with bibliography indicated. I have also addressed these questions in a recent article: A. VIRDIS, “Color in Suger’s Saint-Denis: Matter and Light”, *Convivium*, VIII/2 (2021), pp. 78-95.

⁹ See n. 2.

¹⁰ ECO, *Arte e Bellezza*, esp. ch. 6; U. ECO, “La metafora nel Medioevo latino”, *Doctor Virtualis*, III (2004), pp. 35-75.

expressions in what Suger tells us not just about the main altar at Saint Denis, but also about the *crista*, the vessels, and the various objects made from gems and precious materials.

Before starting such an analysis, I will provide an overview of what the altars and their furnishings may have looked like while Suger was abbot. Some of these items date back to the Merovingian and Carolingian ages, and some to the first half of the twelfth century when they were expressly commissioned by abbot Suger himself. Many items have been lost, and can only be reconstructed using descriptions, drawings, and paintings from after the Middle Ages, or thanks to a few surviving pieces.

THE SURVIVING EVIDENCE AND THE SOURCES: MATERIALS, INVENTORIES, DESCRIPTIONS

Many liturgical items, both from Suger's time and before, have been dispersed because of various historical events: the wars of religion, but, especially, the destructive fury of the French Revolution. Nevertheless, several objects have survived: vessels, vases, and chalices made of gold, gems, and precious or semiprecious stones, some of which were collected or commissioned by Suger himself.¹¹

These objects are also listed in later inventories and descriptions, such as the one compiled in the early eighteenth century by Michel Félibien, which was accompanied by illustrations that allow for identification of objects that have survived to the present day (Fig. 1).¹²

Things change when one tries to reconstruct the altars and their related furnishings; for instance, were it not for Abbot Suger's writings, post-medieval inventories, and the famous early sixteenth-century painting by the anonymous Flemish author known as Master of Saint Giles (which depicts the Mass of Saint Giles and is now at the National Gallery in London), it would not be possible to reconstruct the appearance of the high altar with its gold and gems (Figs. 2-3).

From the jeweled objects once located on the high altar (such as the cross of St. Eligius, dating to the mid-seventh century, or the famous *crista*, which I will discuss later), only a few material fragments remain, all now housed at the *Cabinet des Medailles* of the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, in Paris (Figs. 4-5). Therefore, in order to reconstruct the appearance of the altars at the time of Suger, one must use a wide range of different sources – figurative, material, and textual.

At the time of Suger, who was abbot between 1122 and 1151, three altars followed one another from west to east (Fig. 6).¹³ The westernmost altar was the morning altar, dedicated to

¹¹ For the history of the treasury of the abbey and a catalogue of the objects dating from the early Middle Ages to the French Revolution, see D. GABORIT-CHOPIN, *Le Trésor de Saint-Denis*, (Catalogue of the exhibition, 1991), Paris, 1991. For the vessel known as "Suger's chalice" see Therese Martin's article in this volume.

¹² M. FÉLIBIEN, *Histoire de l'abbaye royale de Saint-Denis en France*, Paris, 1706.

¹³ Many graphic renderings indicating the positions of the altars in the abbey church plan have been proposed, each according to the different reconstructions proposed by the scholars, from Viollet-le-Duc's *Dictionnaire* to our own times. The graphic reconstruction proposed here at fig. 6, after Michael Wyss' *Atlas*, has the martyrs' altar and the reliquary right behind Suger's golden crucifix. M. Wyss, *Atlas historique de Saint-Denis: des origines au 18. siècle*, Paris, 1996.

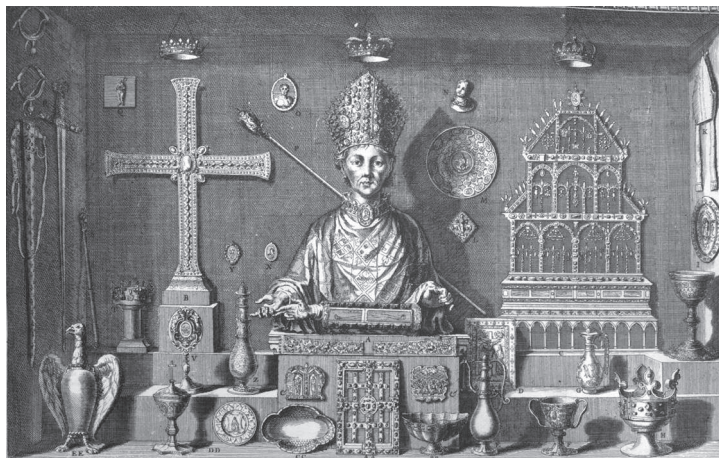


Fig. 1 Treasure of Saint-Denis, engraving by N. Guerard (according to Félibien, 1706, pl. II)



Fig. 2 Master of Saint Giles, *The Mass of Saint Giles*, London, National Gallery, oil on oak, ca. 1500 (photo in the public domain)



Fig. 3 Master of Saint Giles, *The Mass of Saint Giles*, detail of the golden *antependium* of Charles the Bald, London, National Gallery, oil on oak, ca. 1500 (photo in the public domain)

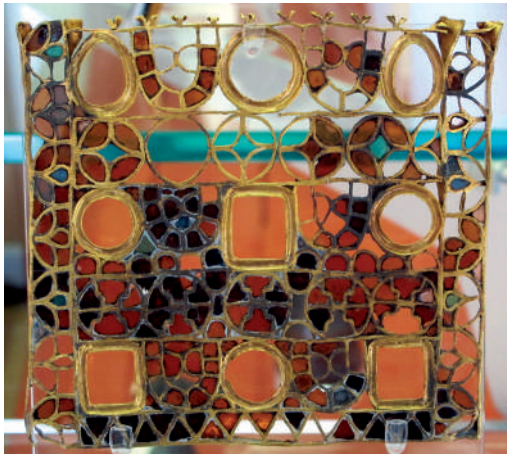


Fig. 4 Fragment of the cross of St. Eligius, Paris, Bibliothèque National de France, Cabinet des Médailles, inv. 56.324, gold, garnets, colored glass, seventh century (photo in the public domain)



Fig. 5 Top jewel of the Crista or Escrain de Charlemagne, Paris, Bibliothèque National de France, Cabinet des Médailles, inv. 58.2089, beryl (intaglio), gold (mount), sapphires (setting), beads (frame), ca. 90 AD (intaglio), ca. 870–877 (setting) (photo in the public domain)

the Holy Trinity, located almost at the center of the nave, behind which were found the tomb of Charles the Bald and the cross that Suger had placed between the altar and the king's tomb.

At the opposite end, presumably in the center of the new choir Suger had commissioned, was the altar "of the holy martyrs". Just to the east of this altar – presumably right behind it – Suger placed a large reliquary in the shape of a temple holding the relics of St. Dionysius and his fellow martyrs, Rusticus and Eleutherius, which Suger had brought up from the Carolingian crypt. This reliquary was destroyed at the time of the French Revolution (Fig. 7).¹⁴

Another victim of the historical events that involved the basilica was the large crucifix with its monumental pedestal, adorned with enameled biblical scenes made by master goldsmiths from Lotharingia (i.e. today's Lorraine) but destroyed at the time of the French Wars of Religion (probably during the looting of 1567). This monumental crucifix, also made of gold and precious stones, was most likely located behind the high altar. It was more than six meters tall, and was therefore likely visible from every part of the church.

Long ago, scholars identified the pedestal of the St.-Bertin Crucifix (located in St.-Omer, northern France) as a work very similar to the pedestal lost from Saint-Denis.¹⁵ The St.-Bertin crucifix pedestal is made of gilded bronze and *champlevé* enamel.

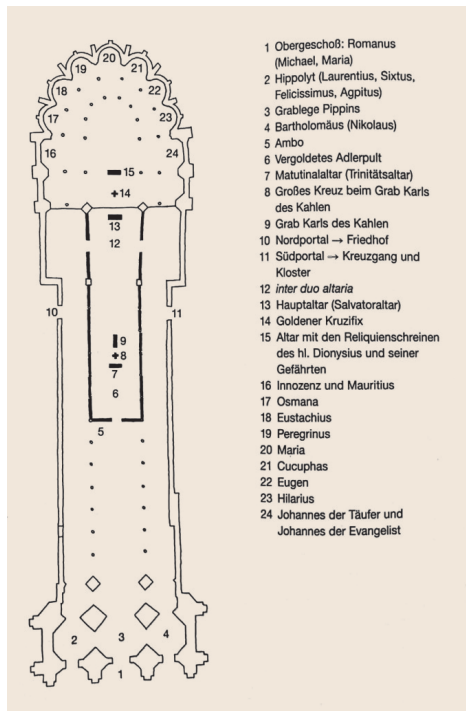
To the west of the upper choir, between the altar of the martyrs and the morning altar, was the high altar. Since late Carolingian times and the reign of Charles the Bald, it had been adorned with an embossed golden *antependium* decorated with precious stones. Its central compartment depicted an enthroned Christ on a double mandorla, flanked by saints and angels. This *antependium* is now lost but is partially visible in the painting by the Master of Saint Giles.

For the main altar, Suger commissioned a rear panel of identical size along with two smaller side panels so that the altar was completely surrounded by gold plates, all embossed and encrusted with assorted gems.¹⁶

¹⁴ According to Elodie Leschot, "The Altar of the Holy Martyrs' exact location is unknown. It could have been to the east, center, or west of the upper choir. In most of the proposed reconstructions, the tomb or mausoleum containing the relics of the Saints Denis, Rustic, and Eleutherius have been forgotten. In 2002, Werner Jacobsen proposed a different reconstruction with a fourth altar dedicated to the Savior, the angels, and the Holy Cross placed under the apse, behind the martyrs' reliquary. Leschot consider this supposed fourth altar nothing more than the new dedication of the former high altar at the transept crossing, as suggested by the Ordinary of the 13th century. See E. LESCHOT, "The Abbey of Saint-Denis and the Coronation of the King of France", *Arts*, ix/4, 111 (2020), pp. 1-15, esp. pp. 7-8; W. JACOBSEN, "Liturgische Kollisionen im Kirchenraum", in N. BOCK, P. KURMANN, S. ROMANO, J-M. SPIESER (eds.), *Art, Cérémonial et Liturgie au Moyen Age*, Roma, 2002, pp. 191-221, p. 202 and fig. 8. The reconstruction proposed at fig. 7, after Viollet-le-Duc's *Dictionnaire*, represents a hypothetical reconstruction and should not be taken as a faithful restoration of the martyr's altar, the reliquary, and its exact location. See E.E. VIOLLET-LE-DUC, *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XI^e au XVI^e siècle*, Paris 1854-1868: s.v. "Autel", fig. 6. See also the amendment proposed in PANOFSKY, *Abbot Suger*, p. xvi, pp. 174-177.

¹⁵ P. VERDIER, "La grand croix de l'abbé Suger à Saint-Denis," *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, xiii (1970), pp. 1-31; H. KESSLER, "They preach not by speaking out loud but by signifying: Vitreous Arts as Typology", *Gesta* LI/1 (2012), pp. 55-70.

¹⁶ Based on the description of a 1634 inventory, the depictions on the two side panels were framed by three arches, repeating the pattern of the *antependium*. In the right panel, the arches housed an image of the Virgin and Child flanked by the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel bearing inscribed *rotuli*; they were surmounted by medallions housing Gospels scenes (*Annunciation*, *Visitation*, *Nativity*). The left panel had the titular saints Dionysius, Rusticus and Eleutherius surmounted by a medallion with the *Agnus Dei* between two censuring angels.



- 1 Obergeschoß: Romanus (Michael, Maria)
- 2 Hippolyt (Laurentius, Sixtus, Felicissimus, Agpitus)
- 3 Grablege Pippins
- 4 Bartholomäus (Nikolaus)
- 5 Ambo
- 6 Vergoldetes Adlerpult
- 7 Matutinalaltar (Trinitätsaltar)
- 8 Großes Kreuz beim Grab Karls des Kahlen
- 9 Grab Karls des Kahlen
- 10 Nordportal → Friedhof
- 11 Südportal → Kreuzgang und Kloster
- 12 inter duo altaria
- 13 Hauptaltar (Salvatoraltar)
- 14 Goldener Kruzifix
- 15 Altar mit den Reliquienschreinen des hl. Dionysius und seiner Gefährten
- 16 Innozenz und Mauritius
- 17 Osmana
- 18 Eustachius
- 19 Peregrinus
- 20 Maria
- 21 Cucuphas
- 22 Eugen
- 23 Hilarius
- 24 Johannes der Täufer und Johannes der Evangelist

Fig. 6 Reconstructive plan of Saint-Denis' abbey church at the time of Suger, with indication of the altars. Elab. M. Wyss. (according to Speer, Binding 2000)

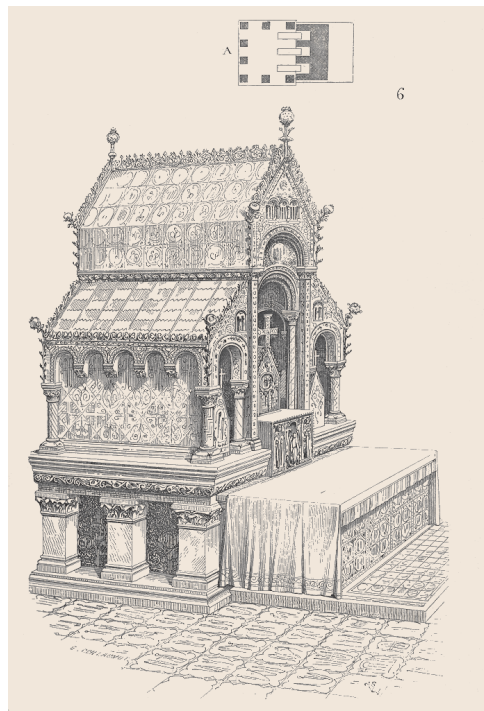


Fig. 7 Altar of the martyrs and reliquary in shape of a temple (according to E.E. Viollet-le-Duc, *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du x^e au xvi^e siècle*, Paris 1854–1868: s.v. "Autel", fig. 6)

The *retrotabula* commissioned by Suger from "*barbari artifices*"¹⁷ (whose identification is problematic)¹⁸ probably disappeared at the time of the occupation of the abbey by English troops in the early fifteenth century.¹⁹

The restructured high altar we see in the painting by the Master of St. Giles dates to the beginning of the sixteenth century. As a result of this rearrangement, the Carolingian *antependium* was put above the altar and replaced, below, by the "Sugerian" panels, which in the painting are covered by a brocaded tablecloth (Fig. 2).

¹⁷ SUGER, *De Administratione* xxxiii. PANOFSKY (ed.), *Abbot Suger*, 1979, pp. 60-66.

¹⁸ See Büchsel on the distinction between *nostrates* and *barbarians*. *Nostrates* normally meant "working on behalf of the abbey" so, strictly speaking all the artists hired by Suger should have been *nostrates*. Therefore, the hypothesis has been advanced by Büchsel that *barbarians* instead refer to the artisans called by Charles the Bald. However, it remains a passage of uncertain interpretation. M. BÜCHESEL, "Materialpracht und die Kunst für *Litterati*. Suger gegen Bernhard von Clairvaux", in M. BÜCHESEL, R. MÜLLER (eds.), *Intellektualisierung und Mystifizierung mittelalterlicher Kunst. »Kultbild«: Revisions eines Begriffs*, Berlin, pp. 156-181.

¹⁹ GABORIT-CHOPIN, *Trésor de Saint-Denis*, p. 124.

FIGURAL LANGUAGE IN *DE ADMINISTRATONE*: ALLEGORIES, TYPOLOGIES, AND SYMBOLS

Symbols and allegories always played a crucial role in the operations and expressions of medieval thought. However, in the Middle Ages there was no real distinction between symbolism and allegory; the terms “symbol” and “allegory” themselves were often interchangeable, as Umberto Eco has clearly shown.²⁰ Until the eighteenth century and the Romantic movement, the two terms were largely synonymous, just as they had been in Classical Antiquity and pre-medieval Jewish culture.²¹ In his discussion of medieval symbolism, Eco makes a preliminary distinction between a symbol which functions as an “apparition or expression that refers to an obscure reality, inexpressible in words (let alone concepts), intimately contradictory, elusive”²² – something which Eco calls “metaphysical pansemiosis” – and “allegorism” (Fig. 9). The latter, in turn, can be subdivided into instances of *allegoria in verbis*, which concerns the precise letter of the text being endowed with a “supersense” that needs to be explained, and another allegorical mode of expression called *allegoria in factis*, which was widely employed during the Middle Ages to interpret the Bible in typological terms, so that Old Testament characters and events were seen as types, anticipations, or pre-figurations of the New Testament.

Typological allegory, then, is not about language, or rather the way language represents facts, but about the facts themselves as they are narrated in the Scriptures; it is not the words that are endowed with “supersense,” but the Old Testament events themselves that are arranged by God to act as figures of the New Law.²³ Metaphysical pansemiosis and literal or typological allegory, whether *in verbis* or *in factis*, could be found right beside each other throughout the Middle Ages.

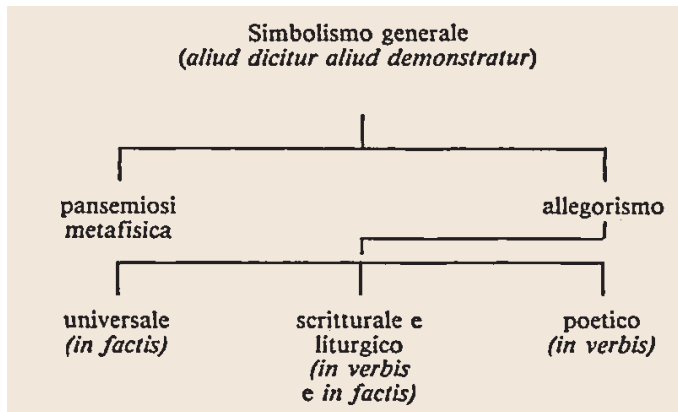


Fig. 9 Umberto Eco's diagram of Medieval Symbolism (according to Eco, 1987, p. 88)

²⁰ Eco, *Arte e Bellezza*, ch. 6.

²¹ Ibidem, pp. 72-73. Eco refers to studies by Erich Auerbach and Jean Pépin. See E. AUERBACH, “Figura”, *Neue Dan-testudien*, V (1944); J. PÉPIN, *Mythe et allégorie. Les origines grecques et les contestations judéo-chrétiennes*, Paris, 1962.

²² Eco, *Arte e Bellezza*, p. 75.

²³ Ibidem, p. 81.

In his writings, Suger frequently resorted to figurative language in order to explain the liturgical furnishings of his basilica. Therefore, I will now focus on the different types of symbolic and allegorical language he employed, especially in *De administratione*, and reconnect them to the different types of figurative language used in Medieval Latin-language culture in general.

Chapter xxxiii of *De Administratione* is devoted to the church's main altar.²⁴ Here Suger repeatedly talks about allegorical interpretation. In a passage describing the altar's rear panel and its reliefs, made with such skill that *materiam superabat opus* – he states that

“because the diversity of the materials [such as] gold, gems and pearls is not easily understood by the mute perception of sight without a description, we have seen to it that this work, which is intelligible only to the literate, which shines with the radiance of delightful allegories, be set down in writing”.²⁵

The verses that Suger wrote to accompany the pictures in the altar's golden panels have made it possible to reconstruct his series of Old and New Testament scenes arranged onto two registers.

These scenes have been interpreted typologically by Panofsky, who reconstructed the pattern of the altar's scenes as follows: the *Entrance to Jerusalem* corresponded to the *Promise of God to Abraham* (Gen, 12); the *Last Supper* corresponded to the *Offering of Melchizedek and Abraham* (Gen, 14:18); finally, the scene of Christ carrying the cross corresponded to the Old Testament scene of the return of the spies from the land of the Canaanites with clusters of grapes (Num, 13:24) (Fig. 8).

It is evident that for Suger, sight alone (*tacita visus cognitione*) could not guarantee access to the full meaning of the various precious materials, so he decided to add verses in order

Fig. 8 Reconstruction of the biblical scenes depicted in the rear panel of the main altar (according to Panofsky, 1979, p. 187)

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| 1 Entry into Jerusalem | 2 Last Supper | 3 Bearing of the Cross |
| 4 The Lord's Promise to Abra- ham (<i>Genesis</i> xii, 1 ff.) | 5 Melchizedek Of- fering Bread and Wine to Abraham (<i>Genesis</i> xiv, 18) | 6 Return of the Spies with the Cluster of Grapes (<i>Numbers</i> xiii, 24) |

²⁴ I follow here the subdivision of chapters in Panofsky edition, being it the best known and most widely used; see PANOFSKY, *Abbot Suger*, pp. 60-66. Nevertheless, I have also constantly referred to the more recent editions by Gasparri (F. GASPARRI, *Suger. Oeuvres, I*, Paris, 2008, *De Administratione*, II, pp. 12-13), Speer and Binding (SPEER, BINDING, *Abt Suger, De Administratione*, III, pp. 214-239).

²⁵ SUGER, *De Administratione*, xxxiii. PANOFSKY (ed.), *Abbot Suger*, 1979, p. 63.

to make this meaning more explicit (albeit only to the literate people). These verses made the meaning of the images more accessible, using what Suger calls *jocundae allegoriae*. *Jocundae*, i.e. pleasant, delightful, because according to the practice of medieval symbolism, to decipher an allegory meant to experience aesthetically the relationship between what is said and what is meant, through the effort of interpreting the text or image.²⁶

Immediately following his explanation of the verses accompanying the typological scenes depicted in the altar's golden panels, Suger describes, in an oft-quoted passage, his admiration for some of the basilica's other *ornamenta*, both ancient and new. Among the *ornamenta* he admires are the large cross of St. Eligius and the *crista* (a non-figurative jeweled object to which I will return later in these pages), both celebrated for their precious materials and their polychrome gems.

"Often we contemplate, out of sheer affection for the church our mother, these different ornaments both new and old; and when we behold how that wonderful cross of St. Eloy – together with the smaller ones – and that incomparable ornament commonly called "the Crest" are placed upon the golden altar, then I say, sighing deeply in my heart: 'Every precious stone was thy covering, the sardius, the topaz, and the jasper, the chrysolite, and the onyx, and the beryl, the sapphire, and the carbuncle, and the emerald' [Ez, 28: 13]. To those who know the properties of precious stones it becomes evident, to their utter astonishment, that none is absent from the number of these (with the only exception of the carbuncle), but that they abound most copiously. Thus, when — out of my delight in the beauty of the house of God — the loveliness of the many-colored gems has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred virtues: then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven; and that, by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner".²⁷

By quoting *verbatim* from the book of Ezekiel (Ez, 28:13), Suger can bring precious gems into play. Almost all the stones mentioned in the prophet's book (sardium, topaz, jasper, chrysolite, onyx, beryl, *saphirus*, carbuncle, and emerald) are present, in fact, in the furnishings of the high altar. More specifically, it is the contemplation of the gems on the Cross of St. Eligius and the *crista* that leads Suger, in a moment of inner reflection and private devotion, to ascend *anagogically* to the supernal world, to an indistinct and immaterial dimension that he reaches via "some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven".²⁸ The precise spark that enables abstraction from earthly things and culminates in an anagogic ascent is the contemplation of those multicolored gems.

A comparison of this passage to the one that immediately precedes it, where Suger describes the pictures on the rear panel of the altar, reveals a possible contradiction requiring an explanation. In the earlier passage, the abbot had stated that the work and its "diversity of the

²⁶ Eco, *Arte e Bellezza*, p. 55.

²⁷ SUGER, *De Administratione* xxxiii. PANOFKY (ed.), *Abbot Suger*, 1979, pp. 63-65.

²⁸ Ibidem.

materials [such as] gold, gems and pearls”²⁹ had to be made more comprehensible by means of explanatory inscriptions. Shortly thereafter, however, the same precious materials and colored gems do not need to be explained or made more understandable, since they themselves elicit the meditation that leads directly away from the material things towards the divine world.

The contradiction in Suger's words is only an apparent one; it actually reveals a distinction arising from the different types of allegorical language used in the Middle Ages.

In describing the main altar and its liturgical furnishings, Suger mainly resorts to two modes of allegorical expression widely used in the Middle Ages: metaphysical pansemiosis and typological allegory.

Metaphysical pansemiosis, for instance, is employed by the abbot when he describes the vision of the polychrome gems as a trigger for anagogic ascent to a higher realm; typological allegory is employed when he talks about the verses that explain the images on the rear panel and clarify the typological pairing of Old and New Testament scenes. Typological allegory, a technique which has been thoroughly investigated by modern scholars of the Middle Ages, is attested by a very long patristic and scholastic tradition. It concerns not only sacred texts and biblical narratives, but also images and materials (as demonstrated long ago by Frederik Ohly³⁰ and more recently by Herbert Kessler). A famous case study is the *brazen serpent* elevated by Moses (Num, 21: 4-8) and interpreted as a figure of the Crucifix. We also see the typological interpretation of vitreous materials, such as enamels or stained glass, which arise through metamorphosis caused by fire; because the material itself undergoes this change, it recalls the transition from a literal, Jewish interpretation of the Law to an evocative Christian interpretation of the Law, reshaped with novel meaning in the New Testament.³¹

Metaphysical pansemiosis, on the other hand, is rooted in early Christian Neoplatonism and finds expression in the negative theology elaborated in the sixth century by pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, especially in the concept of apophatism as expressed in that author's *Mystical Theology*. Apophatism is the idea that God is completely unknowable through reason, since he transcends physical reality and human cognitive abilities; he is therefore ineffable, and definable only by what he is not. In the *Mystical Theology*, for instance, God is named as “the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence,” and it is said that he does not have “a material body, and hence has neither shape nor form, quality, quantity, or weight [...] neither can be seen nor be touched, is neither darkness nor light, is not error nor truth”.³²

Both pseudo-Dionysius and his medieval translators and commentators (John Scotus Eriugena in the ninth century and Hugh of St. Victor in the twelfth) transformed the Platonic idea

²⁹ See n. 25.

³⁰ F. OHLY, “Vom geistigen Sinn des Wortes im Mittelalter,” *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, LXXXIX (1958), pp. 1-23. F. OHLY, *Sensus Spiritualis*, Chicago, 2005, ch. 2, pp. 31-67.

³¹ H. KESSLER, “They preach not by speaking out loud but by signifying”: Vitreous Arts as Typology”, *Gesta*, LI (2012), pp. 55-70.

³² PSEUDO DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De Mystica Theologia* I, 997A; IV, 1040D. G. HEIL, A.M. RITTER (eds.), *Corpus Dionysiacum II. De Coelesti Hierarchia, De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia, De Mystica Theologia, Epistulae*, Berlin, 2012, p. 141, p. 148. For the English translation see C. LIJBHEID, P. ROREM (tr. and ed.), *Pseudo-Dionysius. The Complete Works*, Mahwah, 1987, p. 135, pp. 140-141.

of “emanation of the One” into the Christian concept of “participation of the One.” From this Christian perspective, the symbol is a way to access the divine, but it is not an epiphany of the divine. The symbol refers back to the divine but does not guarantee access to it, and symbolic expressions highlight their inadequacy in expressing the divine.³³

Among commentators on the Areopagite, Scotus Eriugena provided one of the most original theorizations of metaphysical symbolism. For Eriugena, the world is a metaphorical manifestation of God through sensible beauty. The Eternal is revealed in things, which have a metaphorical value in a sort of cosmic allegorism in which the light of divine participation is visible in nature and the things of this world. Eriugena follows the neo-Platonic apophatic tradition, i.e. the idea that God is entirely unknowable through human reason because He transcends physical reality and human cognitive capacities, and can be defined only by what He is not. Hence Scotus Eriugena holds that negation, as a path leading finite thought toward the non-finite, is more revelatory than affirmation, and any affirmation concerning the divine origin of things can be understood only as theophany, symbol, or metaphor. The world itself, for Eriugena, is a divine metaphor.³⁴

The philosopher Werner Beierwaltes provided a comprehensive and fundamental interpretation of this eriugenian system.³⁵ According to Beierwaltes, Eriugena sees the Being in its totality, and the world along with it, as a nuanced unfolding of absolute Light. Light is thus an absolute metaphor, and what is visible in it cannot be communicated by concepts or discourse.³⁶ However, the Being in its totality, precisely by virtue of its character as light, has an anagogic function, referring back from the manifold to the one absolute Light in which it participates.

Eriugena himself, in his commentary on the Areopagite’s *Celestial Hierarchy*, writes that “material lights, both those arranged by nature in the heavenly spaces and those produced on earth by human art, are images of intelligible lights, and especially of the true Light itself”.³⁷

In the twelfth century, Hugh of St. Victor, a contemporary of Suger, took up these ideas from Eriugena in a new commentary on the *Celestial Hierarchy*. Hugh suggested that visible beauty is the image of invisible beauty, stating that “all visible objects are proposed to us for

³³ The *topos* of the “inadequacy of human speech” is often found in late antique and early medieval exegesis and homilies, from Clement of Alexandria (Στρωματεῖς, VI) in the third century, to Marius Victorinus (*Adversus Arium, Ad Candidum*) in the fourth, Claudianus Mamertus in the sixth and the anonymous Carolingian author of the *Dicta Albinii* and *Dicta Candidi*. Scotus Eriugena addresses this problem in the *Homilies of St. John’s Gospel* and especially in *Periphyseon I*, where he tries to understand the applicability of the Aristotelian categories to the Divine Essence. A. LUHTALA, “Linguistics and theology in the Early Medieval West”, in S. AUROUX, E.F.K. KOERNER, H.-J. NIEDEREHE, K. VERSTEEGH (eds.), *History of the Language Sciences*, Berlin, Boston, 2008, pp. 521-522.

³⁴ ERIUGENA, *Periphyseon I* 62, 13; 74, 20; 82, 3. I. P. SHELDON-WILLIAMS (ed.), *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae VII/IX*, Dublin 1968/72; ERIUGENA, *Expositiones in Ierarchiam Coelestem*, II, 1188. J. BARBET (ed.), Turnhout, 1976.

³⁵ W. BEIERWALTES, “*Negati affirmatio*: Welt als Metapher. Zur Grundlegung einer mittelalterlichen Ästhetik durch Johannes Scotus Eriugena”, *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, LXXXIII (1976), pp. 237-265.

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 250.

³⁷ “Materialia lumina, sive quae naturaliter in caelestibus spatiis ordinata sunt, sive quae in terris humano artificio efficiuntur, imagines sunt intelligibilium luminum ac super omnia ipsius verae lucis”, ERIUGENA, *Expositiones I*, 534-537.

the signification and declaration of invisible things, instructing us, through sight, in a symbolic, i.e. figurative way".³⁸

If we now return to Suger's text, we see several elements that allow us to characterize his description of meditating before the polychrome gems of the altar as nothing more and nothing less than a description of metaphysical pansemiosis as found in pseudo-Dionysius, Eriugena, and Hugh of St. Victor. According to those three philosophers, human speech cannot express the process of ascent towards the divine; when Suger says that he seems to be in "some strange region of the universe which neither exists in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven",³⁹ he too is admitting that his words are inadequate for describing the place to which he has been anagogically transferred.

Gems, lights and colors are a metaphor for divine light, and as such they cannot be described using words, so there is no point in having them accompanied by explanatory inscriptions like those Suger provided for the biblical scenes on the altar panels. The connection to the divine realm attained through polychrome gems is not effected through images or speech, but in a different, unmediated way that words cannot describe. Therefore, by virtue of their ineffability, they appear to be closer to the divine than the Biblical scenes. Here Suger is subtly postulating a sort of hierarchy of holiness for ecclesiastical *ornamenta*.

In *De administratione* xxxiii, Suger mentions the beauty of multicolored gems and uses the term *speciositas*; he uses nearly the same term when he describes the Carolingian *antependium* of Charles the Bald, calling it a *speciosa tabula*. Suger's words *speciositas* and *speciosa* in all likelihood have an Areopagitic/Eriugenian origin, since they almost never occur in the writings of the Latin Church Fathers, as Dominique Poirel has perceptively noted.⁴⁰ They recur most often in Eriugena, with at least six occurrences, three of them in his translation of the *Celestial Hierarchy* (*De coelesti hierarchia*), which later served as the basis for Hugh of St. Victor's translation. Using *speciositas* to denote "beauty" was, in fact, so unusual that Hugh of St. Victor, in his commentary on the *Celestial Hierarchy*, found it necessary to give an explanation, resorting to a synonym: *speciositatis, id est pulchritudinis*.⁴¹

Etymological dictionaries of Latin inform us that *speciosus* is derived from *species* in the sense of "beautiful appearance, beauty". But the word *species* is also employed in philosophical language to translate the Greek word *eidos* (εἶδος).⁴² Εἶδος, in turn, has the general meaning of "form", and it refers to the external form; in Neo-platonic terminology, it means "form" in the sense of "a particular type of the Being".⁴³ Suger's *multicolor gemmarum speciositas*,

³⁸ "Quia enim in formis rerum visibilium pulchritudo earumdem consistit, [...] visibilis pulchritudo invisibilis pulchritudinis imago est" [...] "alia omnia visibilia 'quaecumque nobis', visibiliter erudiendis 'simbolice', id est figurative, 'tradita sunt' et proposita ad invisibilium significationem et declarationem". HUGH OF ST. VICTOR, *Super hierarchiam Dionysii* II, I, 949b; 954A. D. POIREL (ed.), Turnhout, 2015, p. 435, p. 442.

³⁹ See n. 21.

⁴⁰ D. POIREL, "Symbolice et anagogice: l'école de Saint-Victor et la naissance du style gothique", in D. POIREL (ed.) *L'abbé Suger, le manifeste gothique de Saint-Denis et la pensée victorine*, Turnhout, 2001, pp. 141-153.

⁴¹ HUGH OF ST. VICTOR, *Super hierarchiam Dionysii* 997b. D. POIREL (ed.), Turnhout, 2015, p. 505.

⁴² Among many see, for instance, A. ERNOUT, A. MEILLET, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine*, Paris, 1932, s.v. "species".

⁴³ It is used in this sense by PROCLUS, *Institutio Theologica* 157. DODDS (ed.), Oxford, 1963. See *Diccionario Griego-Español*, Madrid, 1980 -, s.v. "εἶδος".

then, refers to the beauty of the gems as a particular manifestation of the Being, a pathway to the divine through the sensible which captures its beauty.

THE CRISTA ON THE ALTAR

I will now return to the liturgical furnishings of the high altar of Saint-Denis. One of Suger's peculiar anagogical meditations centers on the so-called *crista*, which in ancient sources and inventories was also called the *gypsa*, *Escrain de Charlemagne*, or *Escrain Kalle*. What remains of this object is only its top part, a central carved aquamarine from the first century AD, mounted in openwork within a circle of gold, and surrounded by nine sapphires (also in openwork), each surmounted by a pearl (Fig. 5). A watercolor made by Étienne-Éloi Labarre in 1794, shortly before the *crista*'s destruction at the time of the French Revolution, enables its complete appearance to be reconstructed, although with some caveats, because the *crista* underwent some changes in the late-medieval times and even later (Fig. 10).

This enigmatic object can be interpreted as an ecclesiastical architectural structure with its bottom twelve minor arches enclosed within four major arches, a pattern repeated in the two upper registers but each time using fewer arches so as to make the structure narrower towards the top like a church nave. In these three registers, the minor arches (twelve, seven, then three), enclosed within four arches, then three, and finally one major arch, have been explained as referring to the most important numbers in Christian numerology,⁴⁴ and the entire *crista* has been quite convincingly called a representation of the Heavenly Jerusalem.⁴⁵

As far as the name of this object goes, in Suger's time it was mainly known as the *crista*. It is mentioned by this name in a source from the second half of the twelfth century, the *Gesta Philippi Augusti* compiled by the monk Rigord. Moreover, Suger explicitly says that it was placed above the altar; therefore, the name *crista* has the sense of "crest," i.e. the top part of the altar.⁴⁶

The arches of the *crista*, therefore, stood as a continuation and extension of the arches embossed in the golden *antependium*, and helped create a vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem just above the Christ in Majesty of the Carolingian panel. It was only sometime after the thirteenth century that the *crista* was transformed into a reliquary with the addition of a bottom part (not mentioned, in fact, in the Carolingian and twelfth century sources) and removed from the altar.

The *crista* was therefore not originally meant to be a separate object, like a reliquary, but rather an integral part of the altar, offering a vision of the heavenly city that complemented the golden and jeweled Christ in Majesty of the *antependium*.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ V. PICHANIČOVÁ, 'Lapides Pretiosi Omnes Muri Tui...'. *Use and Representation of Precious Stones in Religious Objects of the Latin West in the Early Middle Ages*, Ph. Diss. Masaryk University, Brno, 2021, pp. 67-73. I thank dr. Pichaničová for sharing her Ph.D. dissertation with me.

⁴⁵ J. BARBIER, "Nouvelles remarques sur l'«Escrain de Charlemagne»", *Bulletin de la Société Nationale des Antiquaires de France* (1995), pp. 254-265.

⁴⁶ PICHANIČOVÁ, *Lapides Pretiosi*, p. 71.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 72.

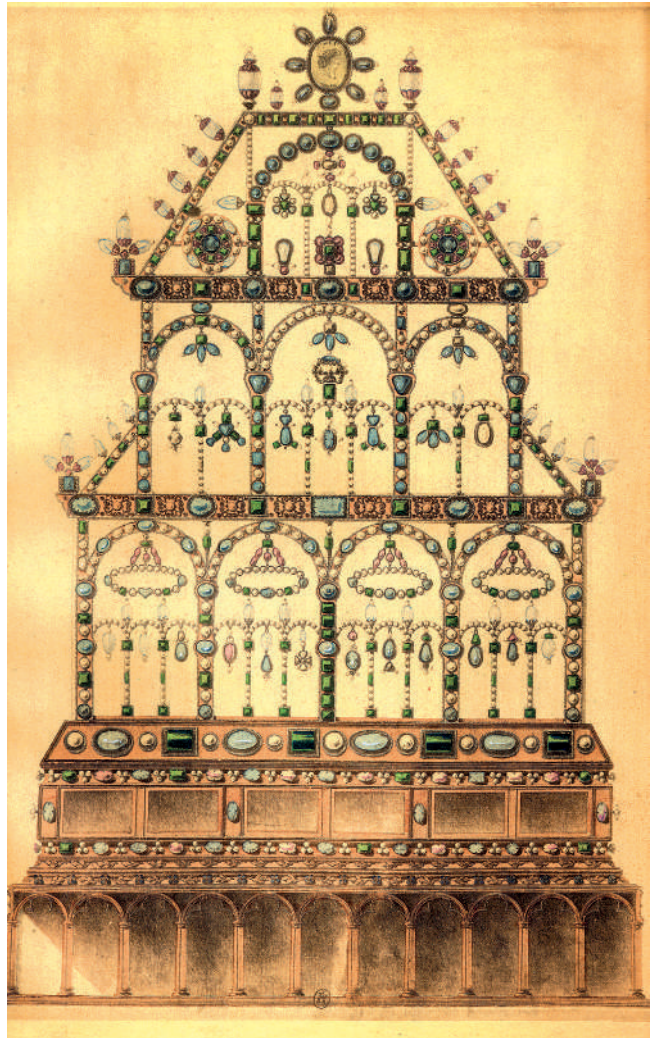


Fig. 10 Étienne-Éloi Labarre, *Crista* or *Escrein de Charlemagne*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Cabinet des Estampes, watercolor drawing, 1794, inv. Le 38C-fol (photo in the public domain)

Furthermore, this image of the Heavenly Jerusalem also encouraged the viewer to “see” the saints inhabiting the heavenly city, since it directed the gaze through and beyond its arches towards the reliquary of the martyred saints located in Suger’s new choir.

This interpretation of the *crista* as a sort of screen would explain the other name by which it was known: *escrein*, or more precisely, the *Escrein de Charlemagne* (although this name appears only in post-medieval inventories, from the sixteenth century on). The word *escrein*, according to recent etymological studies⁴⁸, is connected not only with the Germanic root

⁴⁸ G. AVEZZÙ, “The deep time of the screen and its forgotten etymology,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, XI/1 (2019), pp. 1-15.

**s-krank* from which the English word “shrine” and the Italian “scigno” are derived (in the sense of “casket” or “reliquary”), but also with the word “screen”, which is likely from the Latin verb *cernere* or *excernere* meaning not only “to look”, but also “to create a visual separation”. Choir-screens, for instance, have this double meaning, since they generate interest in what lies behind them but also divide the visual space.

One can reasonably conclude, then, that the *crista* “served as a ‘window’ onto the divine and contained several meanings conveyed by numbers, colors, and gemstones”.⁴⁹

ALLEGORY AND MATERIALITY ON THE ALTAR

To recap: Suger’s description of the liturgical furnishings of the main altar of Saint-Denis (*De Administratione* xxxiii) employs the normal figurative and allegorical modes of expression in use in the Middle Ages: the typological allegory, to which Suger resorts in the explanatory verses that accompany the biblical scenes on the rear panel of the altar, and symbolism (or what Eco calls “metaphysical pansemiosis”), which requires neither images nor explanatory inscriptions because no words can properly describe what can only be intuited in an un-mediated way, as a divine metaphor. The latter is the kind of figurative language that Suger seems to employ when he describes his experience of anagogic ascent, triggered by his meditation in front of the polychrome gems of the *crista/escrain de Charlemagne*, a sort of screen offering a vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem.

These two different modes of figurative discourse are combined in the altar. Both the materials used to furnish the altar and the images on its golden panels can, in fact, be read within a figurative context established by the liturgical functions performed on the altar. The liturgical language itself (the body and blood of Christ as the bread and wine) is figurative by nature; liturgy is an allegory *in verbis* and *in factis* (in gestures, colors, and images).

In the final lines of chapter xxxiii of *De Administratione*, Suger makes clear how much he cares about the figurative interpretation of the materials used for the *vasa sacra* he had collected or commissioned.

“To me, I confess, one thing has always seemed preeminently fitting: that every costlier or costliest thing should serve, first and foremost, for the administration of the Holy Eucharist. *If golden pouring vessels, golden vials, golden little mortars used to serve, by the word of God or the command of the Prophet, to collect the blood of goats or calves or the red heifer: how much more must golden vessels, precious stones, and whatever is most valued among all created things, be laid out, with continual reverence and full devotion, for the reception of the blood of Christ.*”⁵⁰

First of all, he states that every precious object, even the most valuable, must serve a function in the Eucharist. Then, using a cross-paraphrase of the Pauline letter to the

⁴⁹ This is the conclusion on the function of the *crista* reached in PICHANIČOVÁ, *Lapides pretiosi*, pp. 72-73.

⁵⁰ *Sī libatoria aurea, si fialae aurae, et si mortariola aurea ad collectam sanguinis hircorum aut vitulorum aut vaccae ruffae, ore Dei, aut prophetae jussu, deservebant: quanto magis ad susceptionem sanguinis Jesu Christi, vasa aurea, lapides preciosi, quaeque inter omnes creaturas carissima, continuo famulatu, plena devotione exponi debent.* SUGER, *De Administratione* xxxiii. PANOFKY (ed.), *Abbot Suger*, 1979, p. 64. The italics in the English and Latin versions are in the original edition by Panofsky; the underlining is mine (see n. 52).

Hebrews⁵¹ and the first book of Maccabees,⁵² Suger asserts that if the sacred vessels served, in the Old Testament, to collect the blood of the sacrificial victims – blood that would cleanse those Israelites who were impure, then all the more should Christians have golden vessels and precious stones (*vasa aurea* and *lapides preciosi*) to collect the blood of Jesus Christ.

In this passage, Suger provides a double justification for the use of precious objects and materials in his church. On one hand, he resorts once again to typological allegory when he cross-quotes the Old and New Testaments; on the other hand, he reiterates the importance of precious materials as vehicles for approaching God anagogically.

Suger is probably also thinking anagogically when, in the final paragraph of *De Consecratione*, he describes how altars are consecrated in the presence of the most important ecclesiastical dignitaries. Here, in a final invocation to God, Suger reiterates that through the Holy Eucharist, the Lord unites the material to the immaterial, the corporeal to the spiritual, the human to the Divine, transforming the present church into the heavenly realm.⁵³

There is one more kind of allegory that Suger seems to use in order to metaphorically interpret precious materials: the so-called “encyclopedic allegory.” According to Eco, in fact, medieval encyclopedias arose to satisfy a hermeneutical need to decipher *allegoriae in factis*.⁵⁴ Precious gems, for example, contained such a wide range of meanings, biblical and theological connections, and real or supposed properties, that in order to be understood and deciphered, one needed an encyclopedia of one kind or another. For gems, one found that information in so-called ‘lapidaries’.

Among the many gems mentioned by Suger and used to adorn liturgical objects or decorate other parts of the basilica, a good case-study is the *saphirus*. Often present in the various objects and liturgical furnishings described by the abbot, *saphirus* is also alluded to in the

⁵¹ *Si enim sanguis hircorum et taurorum, et cinis vitulae aspersus inquinatos sanctificat ad emundationem carnis: quanto magis sanguis Christi, qui per Spiritum Sanctum semetipsum obtulit immaculatum Deo, emundabit conscientiam nostram ab operibus mortuis, ad serviendum Deo viventi?* (Heb, 9:13). The italics are mine; they highlight the passage quoted by Suger. English translation: “For if the blood of goats and calves and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkled on those who are defiled, sanctify them, cleansing them in the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who with an eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse our conscience from dead works, to serve the living God?”.

⁵² *Et intravit in sanctificationem cum superbia, et accepit altare aureum, et candelabrum luminis, et universa vasa eius, et mensam propositionis, et libatoria, et phialas, et mortariola aurea, et velum, et coronas, et ornamentum aureum, quod in facie templi erat: et comminuit omnia* 1Macc, 1:21-24. The non-italics are mine; they highlight the passages quoted by Suger (see n. 50). English translation: “He entered the sanctuary arrogantly and took away from it the golden altar and the candlestick of lamps with all its furnishings and the table of offering and the vessels for libations, the golden cups and censers, the veil, the crowns and friezes of gold from the facade of the temple, and he unpacked it all; he seized the silver and gold and every valuable object and took away the hidden treasures that he could find; then, having collected everything, he returned to his region. He also made much slaughter and spoke with great arrogance”. This passage tells about King Antiochus IV Seleucid’s attempt to Hellenize and forcibly convert the Jews, to which the most loyal Jews did not submit, starting a rebellion.

⁵³ *Quae sacramentali sanctissimi Chrismatis delibutione et sanctissimae Eucharistiae susceptione materialia immaterialibus, corporalia spiritualibus, humana divinis uniformiter concopulas*. SUGER, *De Consecratione* VII. PANOFSKY (ed.), *Abbot Suger*, p. 120.

⁵⁴ Eco, *Arte e Bellezza*, pp. 83-87.

expression *materia saphirorum*. Suger uses this expression in his writings on two different occasions to refer to the blue backgrounds of the stained glass windows of the *chevet* (Figs 11-12). The first time, he thanks the Lord for providing the master glaziers with an abundance of *materia saphirorum* and sufficient funds to complete the work;⁵⁵ the second time, Suger celebrates the great value of the stained-glass windows due to the large expenditure undertaken for *vitri vestiti et saphirorum materia*.⁵⁶ This enigmatic expression has been translated in different ways in the three main modern critical editions of Suger's text (i.e. Panofsky, Gasparri, Speer and Binding).⁵⁷ In some cases it has been translated simply as "blue glass," whereas in others, the connection with the pigment or the raw material used to color the glass has been

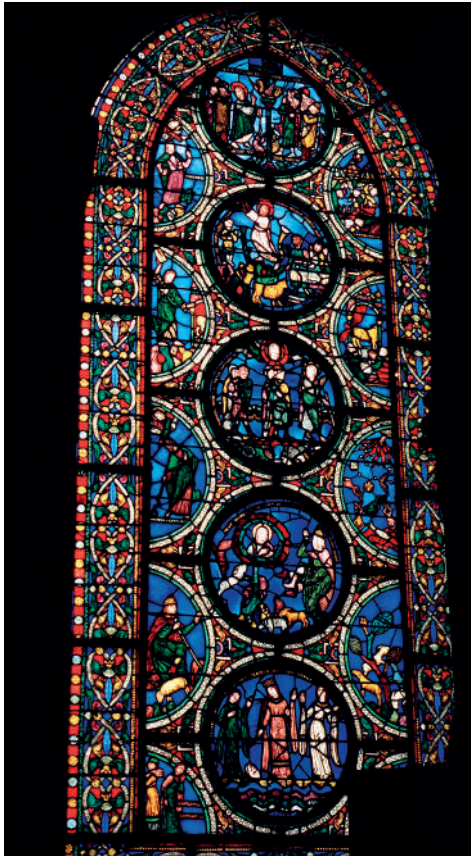


Fig. 11 *Moses window*, Chapel of St Peregrinus, northern bay, abbey church of Saint-Denis, Saint-Denis, stained glass, ca. 1140–1144 (photo: author).

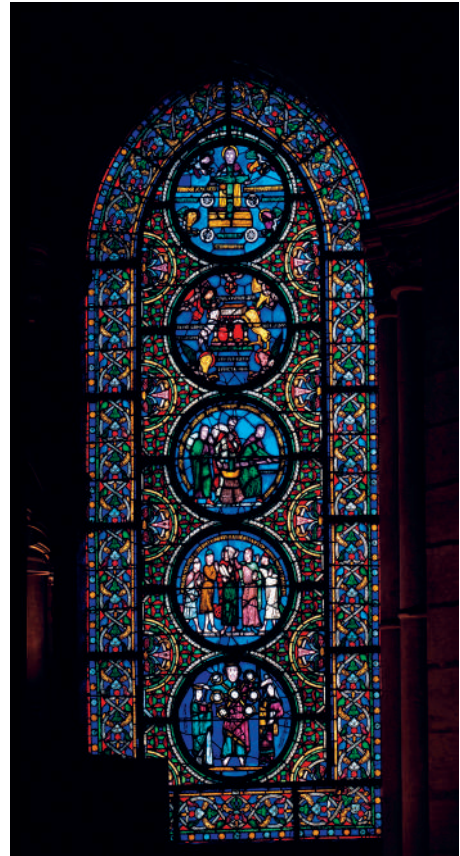


Fig. 12 *Anagogical window*, Chapel of St Peregrinus, southern bay, abbey church of Saint-Denis, Saint-Denis, stained glass, ca. 1140–1144 (photo: author)

⁵⁵ SUGER, *De Administratione* xxix. Panofsky (ed.), *Abbot Suger*, 1979, p. 52.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 76.

⁵⁷ See n. 24.

highlighted. It is likely, although yet to be conclusively demonstrated, that the term *materia sapphirorum* also contains a reference to *saffre*, the silicon and cobalt oxide-based pigment mined in Saxony and used to create cobalt blue pigment for blue stained glass.⁵⁸

The reference to the gemstone called *saphirus* is more obvious, but this word in classical and medieval Latin (and the corresponding Ancient Greek and Hebrew words, *σάπφειρος* and *sappir*) did not denote our sapphire (blue corundum) but rather lapis lazuli. For most of the Middle Ages, what we would call sapphire was probably called *iacinctus*.⁵⁹ Only from the thirteenth century on, starting with Albert the Great's treatise *De mineralibus*, would *saphirus* unequivocally denote the transparent stone that we now call sapphire.⁶⁰ From the fourth century BC, when Theophrastus wrote his famous lapidary, through Pliny the Elder and Isidore of Seville and then until at least the eleventh century AD, when Marbodius of Rennes wrote his book on stones, *saphirus* unquestionably meant a blue non-transparent stone, clearly identifiable as lapis lazuli.⁶¹ The semantic shift from lapis lazuli to sapphire seems to have occurred around Suger's time, at an as yet unspecified moment between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This makes it difficult to figure out if Suger meant our sapphire or lapis lazuli. He may already be referring to the transparent sapphire, since sapphires appears in the top part of the *crista* (the only fragment preserved) and in other altar objects described either by Suger or in post-medieval inventories. Still, because this testimony is so limited, we cannot know for sure.

Despite all these problems of interpretation and translation, whichever stone Suger had in mind carried many layers of meaning that were ultimately based on the Bible. For instance, in the book of Exodus (Ex, 24: 9-10) the floor on which the Lord rests his feet is *opus lapidis sapphirini* and it is "the color of the sky when it is clear".⁶² The Bible's comparison of a *saphirus* and the clear sky would be very popular in the biblical exegesis of the early Middle Ages.

Similarly, in Ezekiel's vision (Ez, 1:26) the throne on which the Lord sits is described as looking like a *saphirus*. Finally, in the New Testament, the description of the walls of the Heavenly Jerusalem (Rev, 21) lists the *saphirus* among the stones that dot the foundation of the heavenly city.⁶³

Early medieval exegesis of the biblical passages quoted above is very extensive. Bede the Venerable, for instance, in his *Commentary on Revelation*, glossed the passage in Revelation 21 where the gem "*saphirus*" appears by summarizing its Old Testament antecedents in

⁵⁸ This issues are further discussed in A. VIRDIS, "Suger di Saint-Denis e la *materia sapphirorum*: un'indagine fra cronimimi medievali, gemme e pigmenti", *Spolia*, xvii/7 (2021), pp. 342-390.

⁵⁹ For further bibliography, see *ibidem*.

⁶⁰ ALBERTUS MAGNUS, *De Mineralibus*. RIDDLE, MULHOLLAND (eds.), Toronto, 1980.

⁶¹ THEOPHRASTUS, *Περὶ λίθων*, MOTTANA, NAPOLITANO (eds.), "Il libro «Sulle pietre» di Teofrasto. Prima traduzione italiana con un vocabolario dei termini mineralogici", *Atti della Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, Classe di scienze fisiche, matematiche e naturali*, 8, 3, serie 9^a, Roma, 1997, pp. 151-234; MARBODIUS OF RENNES, *De Lapidibus*, V. RIDDLE (ed.), Wiesbaden, 1977; PLINY THE ELDER, *Natural History*, XXXVII, 120; EICHHOLZ (ed.), vol. x, books 36-37, Loeb Classical Library 419, Cambridge (MA), 1962; ISIDORE OF SEVILLE, *Etymologiae*, xvi, 9. W.M. LINSLEY (ed.), 1962.

⁶² Ex, 24: 9-10: *ascenderuntque Moyses et Aaron, Nadab et Abiu et septuaginta de senioribus Israel. Et viderunt Deum Israel, et sub pedibus eius quasi opus lapidis sapphirini et quasi caelum, cum serenum est.*

⁶³ Rev, 21: 19: *Et fundamenta muri civitatis omni lapide pretioso ornata. Fundamentum primum, iaspis, secundum, saphirus, tertium, chalcedonius, quartum smaragdus.*



Fig. 13. *Prophet Daniel window*, southern clerestory, Augsburg Cathedral, stained glass, after 1132 (photo: author)

the books of Exodus and Ezekiel, then connecting them with Paul's Epistle to the Philippians. Bede concludes that the glory of the Lord consists precisely in the color of that stone, which has the divine image imprinted on it.⁶⁴ In the Carolingian age, Rabanus Maurus, in the chapter on gems in his work *De universo*, took up Bede's interpretation and quoted it *verbatim*.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ SECUNDUS SAPHIRUS. *Hujus lapidis colorem pariter et sacramentum Moyses exposuit, cum Dei habitum describens diceret: Sub pedibus ejus quasi opus lapidis saphiri, et quasi caelum cum serenum est. Hiezechiel quoque dicit quod locus in quo thronus dei sit, saphiri habeat similitudinem, et gloria domini in hoc colore consistat, qui portat*

Therefore, the *saphiri* embedded in the various furnishings of the altar at Saint-Denis (as well as in Suger's monumental crucifix, on which the nails of the cross were made of *saphiri*) and the *materia saphirorum*, which was used prolifically in the stained glass windows of the choir, were charged with many references to the Bible and medieval biblical exegesis. This makes clear the special importance that the abbot assigned to this material.

The references to the Heavenly Jerusalem in the *crista* and the scenes depicted on the golden altar were echoed in the polychrome stained glass windows of the choir, where the sacred story emerged from *saphirus*-colored backgrounds. Suger, by introducing this novel color into the stained glass windows he commissioned, completely broke with the earlier tradition of Romanesque stained glass, which had been characterized by the wide use of white or red backgrounds (Fig. 13). Finally, it is also possible that Suger wanted to play with the popular notion that stained glass windows themselves actually contained precious stones.⁶⁶ Suger's stained glass windows, then, did more than just illuminate the church by allowing colored light in. Just like the real gems embedded in the altar's furnishings, the windows referred their viewer to the sapphires in the Bible and to all their theological meanings.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, the importance of the references to the Areopagitic and Eriugenian Neoplatonic in Suger's writings cannot be denied any longer: these can be detected in language like *anagogico more*, *speciositas*, and *de materialibus ad immaterialia*. The absence of literal quotations from the text of pseudo-Dionysius or his Latin translations in the inscriptions Suger commissioned for the abbey church's portals and some of its liturgical objects has been cited as evidence that there is no Neo-Platonic philosophical background to the abbot's writings.⁶⁷ This assertion, however, misconstrues the way medieval authors referred to other works. It is not necessary to find lengthy literal quotations from the texts of pseudo-Dionysius, Eriugena or Hugh of St. Victor in order to confirm the links between that philosophical tradition and Suger, *verbatim* quotes are neither mandatory nor necessary in medieval Latin culture, where citation occurred in various ways, using "words as tracers, as digits in a code of recognition".⁶⁸

imaginem supercaelestis, ut qui talis est, cum Apostolo possit dicere: Nostra autem conversatio in caelis est. Qui radiis percussus solis, ardentem fulgorem ex se emittit, quia caelestibus semper intentus sanctorum animus, divini luminis cotidie radiis innovatus, concunctor quodammodo atque ardentior aeterna perquirat aliisque inquirenda persuadet. BEDE THE VENERABLE, *Expositio Apocalypseos* 3.21, GRYSO (ed.), 2001, pp. 534-535.

⁶⁵ RABANUS MAURUS, *De Universo* 17.7. MIGNE (ed.), PL 111, coll. 465-472.

⁶⁶ The idea of the preciousness of glass, based on the false popular belief that among the components of stained glass there were precious metals or stones, is attested as early as the sixth century in Gregory of Tours' *Liber in gloria martyrum*, ch. 58, where he reports the intrusion into the church of Yzeures of a thief who, finding nothing to steal, resolved to melt the glass in the windows, convinced that he would profit from it. The passage from Gregory of Tours is quoted and commented on in F. DELL'ACQUA, *Illuminando colorat*, Spoleto, 2003, pp. 106-107.

⁶⁷ A. SPEER, "Abt Sugers Schriften zur fränkischen Königsabtei Saint-Denis", in SPEER, BINDING, *Abt Suger*, pp. 13-57.

⁶⁸ MOSETTI CASARETTO, "Letteratura mediolatina e strategia della citazione", in G. PERON (ed.), *La citazione*, Atti del XXXI Convegno interuniversitario (Bressanone/Brixen, 11-13 luglio 2003), Padova, 2009, pp. 15-30, p. 22. On the techniques of quotation in the Middle Ages see also U. ECO, "Riflessioni sulle tecniche di citazione nel Medioevo", in M. MONTANARI (ed.), *Ideologie e pratiche del reimpiego nell'alto Medioevo* (XLVI Settimana di studi del CISAM, Spoleto, 16-21 Aprile 1998), Spoleto, 1999, pp. 461-484.

The Neo-Platonic areopagitic theological background can be most strongly perceived in the contents and themes of Suger's writings; these rely heavily on Eriugena's concepts of metaphor and theophany. Suger's figurative language includes all the main types of figurative expression used in the Middle Ages (typological, encyclopedical, and liturgical allegories), but especially metaphysical pansemiosis, to which the abbot recurs while trying to describe his experience of meditation before the polychrome gems of the altar.

It is precisely with reference to the altar that Suger describes a synthesis of the different types of allegories. When the Eucharist was celebrated on the altar, in fact, allegory was present in the words spoken, in the actions and gestures of the celebrant, in the colors of the liturgical vestments, in the materials of the precious objects of liturgical furnishings, and in the sacred scenes and figures depicted on those furnishings.

Even if Suger's reflections on the altars, their furnishings, the choir, and the stained glass windows mainly have to do with the liturgy, this in no way excludes the presence of a neo-Platonic Areopagitic-Eriugenian philosophical and theological background;⁶⁹ all the liturgical vessels and the other *ornamenta*, in fact, refer to something beyond their concrete appearance and materiality in precisely the sense indicated by the Dionysian-Eriugenian concept of theophany.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ This is the position held by Speer; see n. 4 and, especially, SPEER, "Abt Sugers Schriften".

⁷⁰ BEIERWALTES, "*Negati affirmatio*", p. 157.