



Abstract – Color in Suger’s Saint-Denis: Matter and Light

The vast examination and analysis of Abbot Suger and the choir of Saint-Denis have mainly focused on the role and importance of the light coming through the stained-glass windows, neglecting the role of color in defining the cathedral’s interior space. The same can be said of the references in Suger’s writings to the colors of the stained-glass windows as well as of other early medieval goldsmithery objects once held in the basilica. This article analyzes mentions of color in Suger’s writings in connection with related works of art. Considerations include the different ways in which color was understood in medieval culture, possible interpretations of the expression *materia saphirorum* and the *vexata quaestio* of the links between Suger and the metaphysics of light in Dionysius the Areopagite. Altogether, these considerations show how a full understanding of color-related issues is necessary for a correct interpretation of both Suger’s writings and the stained-glass windows in the basilica’s choir.

Keywords – Abbot Suger, color, gemstones, Heavenly Jerusalem, lapis lazuli, *materia saphirorum*, metaphysics of light, pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Saint-Denis, stained glass

Alberto Virdis

Masaryk University, Brno
alberto.virdis@gmail.com

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Alberto Virdis

Within the vast number of studies on Suger's activities as an abbot and the patron of the renovation of the choir of the Saint-Denis abbey church, contributions dedicated to the issue of color are outnumbered by those focusing on the much-debated question of the Neoplatonic metaphysics of light. The issue raised in the famous monograph by Erwin Panofsky has polarized critics since the second half of the twentieth century¹.

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1 Erwin Panofsky, *Abbot Suger. On the Abbey Church of St-Denis and its Art Treasures*, Princeton 1946 [G. Panofsky-Soergel ed., Princeton 1979]. On the reconstruction of the program of the choir windows, see also Louis Grodecki, *Les vitraux de Saint-Denis. Études sur le vitrail au XIIe siècle (Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi: France, vol. 1)*, Paris 1976; *Abbot Suger and Saint Denis. A Symposium*, Paula Lieber Gerson ed., New York 1986; Louis Grodecki, *Études sur les vitraux de Suger à Saint-Denis (XIIe siècle) (Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi: France, vol. III)*, Paris 1995. The still lively critical debate triggered by Panofsky's study is vast and cannot be fully accounted for in the space of a footnote. For a synthesis, see Francesca

Dell'Acqua, "L'auctoritas dello pseudo-Dionigi e Sugerio di Saint-Denis", *Studi medievali*, 3 s., LV/1 (2014), pp. 189–213 and Jelena Bogdanović, "Rethinking the Dionysian Legacy in Medieval Architecture: East and West", in *Dionysius the Areopagite Between Orthodoxy and Heresy*, Filip Ivanović ed., Newcastle upon Tyne 2011, pp. 109–134. Panofsky's theses found wide acceptance right from the start, as shown by Hans Sedlmayr, *Die Entstehung der Kathedrale*, Zurich 1950 and Otto von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral*, London 1956. The connection between the metaphysics of light of Dionysius the Areopagite, John Scotus Eriugena, and Suger has been further explored by several scholars: Werner Beierwaltes, "'Negati affirmatio'. Welt als Metapher. Zur Grundlegung einer mittelalterlichen Ästhetik durch Johannes Scotus Eriugena", *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, LXXXIII (1976), pp. 237–265; *idem*, *Eriugena. Grundzüge seines Denkens*, Frankfurt am Main 1994; Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius. A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to their Influence*, New York 1993; Herbert L. Kessler, "The Function of *Vitrum vestitum* and the Use of *Materia saphirorum* in Suger's St.-Denis", in *L'image. Fonctions et usages des images dans l'Occident médiéval*, Jérôme Baschet ed., Paris 1996, pp. 179–203 [repr. in Herbert L. Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing: Picturing God's Invisibility in Medieval Art*, Philadelphia 2000, pp. 190–205]. The links between Suger's writings and the thought of Hugh of St Victor have been investigated in Dominique Poirel, "Symbolice et anagogice: l'école de Saint-Victor et la naissance du style gothique", in *L'abbé Suger, le manifeste gothique de Saint-Denis et la pensée victorine*, Dominique Poirel ed., Turnhout 2001; Conrad Rudolph, "Inventing the Exegetical Stained-Glass Window: Suger, Hugh, and a New

Of course, over the decades, several critical studies have included reflections on the topic of “color” and the expression *saphirorum materia* that was used several times in Suger’s writings in reference to the bright blue background of Saint-Denis’ stained-glass windows. In more general terms, the vast majority of studies on the topic of color in the Middle Ages, and not only in art history, have dedicated some attention to Suger’s writings and Saint-Denis’ stained-glass windows [Figs 1–3]. By way of example, it is worth mentioning the works of Michel Pastoureau – above all *Bleu. Histoire d’une couleur* – and the monumental monograph by John Gage, *Colour and Culture*². A similar argument can be made for surveys on medieval stained glass, which often include analysis of glass coloring techniques and, sometimes, of the symbolic aspects of color: in most of these publications, Saint-Denis is a mandatory point of reference³. However, in art historical studies there is a general lack of interest in the topic of color beyond technical aspects linked to the materiality of pigments or the problems of restoration and conservation⁴. Studies specifically focusing on the issue of “color” in Suger’s writings and in Saint-Denis’ stained-glass windows remain scarce⁵. This article aims to fill this gap, starting with an investigation of the occurrences of “color” found in Abbot Suger’s *De administratione* and *De consecratione*. These works will be examined in parallel with the works of art mentioned in them, as a part of an inquiry into the ways color was seen in different areas of medieval culture. The goal is to reintegrate the role of color into the interpretation of the stained-glass windows and interior space of the Dionysian basilica, against the backdrop of the long-debated question of the actual impact of pseudo-Dionysian metaphysics of light on the creation of Suger’s Saint-Denis.

Suger’s *De administratione* and colors

Out of the abbot’s various writings, two have held the attention of scholars: first, *De administratione* (1144–1145 CE), in which Suger reports the outcomes of his work as an abbot and describes reconstruction works in the basilica, the creation of stained-glass windows for the

choir, the enlargement of the treasury, and the restoration of liturgical objects; second, *De consecratione* (1144 CE), where he describes the circumstances of the reconstruction of the basilica and recounts the consecration ceremony for the twenty altars of the choir by the major prelates of France. Here, we can find the majority of the few, but densely significant, references to color present in Sugerian writings.

In chapter xxix of *De administratione*, Suger describes the precious material used to make the brilliant blue background of the stained-glass windows as follows:

“For the most liberal Lord Who, among other greater things, has also provided the makers of the marvelous windows, a rich supply of sapphire glass [*materiam saphirorum locupletem*], and ready funds of about seven hundred pounds or more will not suffer that there be a lack of means for the completion of the work”⁶.

Further on, Suger states, in a technical note, that, because of the high value of the stained-glass windows and the expense involved in having the painted glass made and because of the abundance of *materiam saphirorum* in the choir windows [Figs 1–2], he appointed a master glassmaker for their conservation and restoration, together with a master goldsmith to take care of the conservation of gold and silver objects.

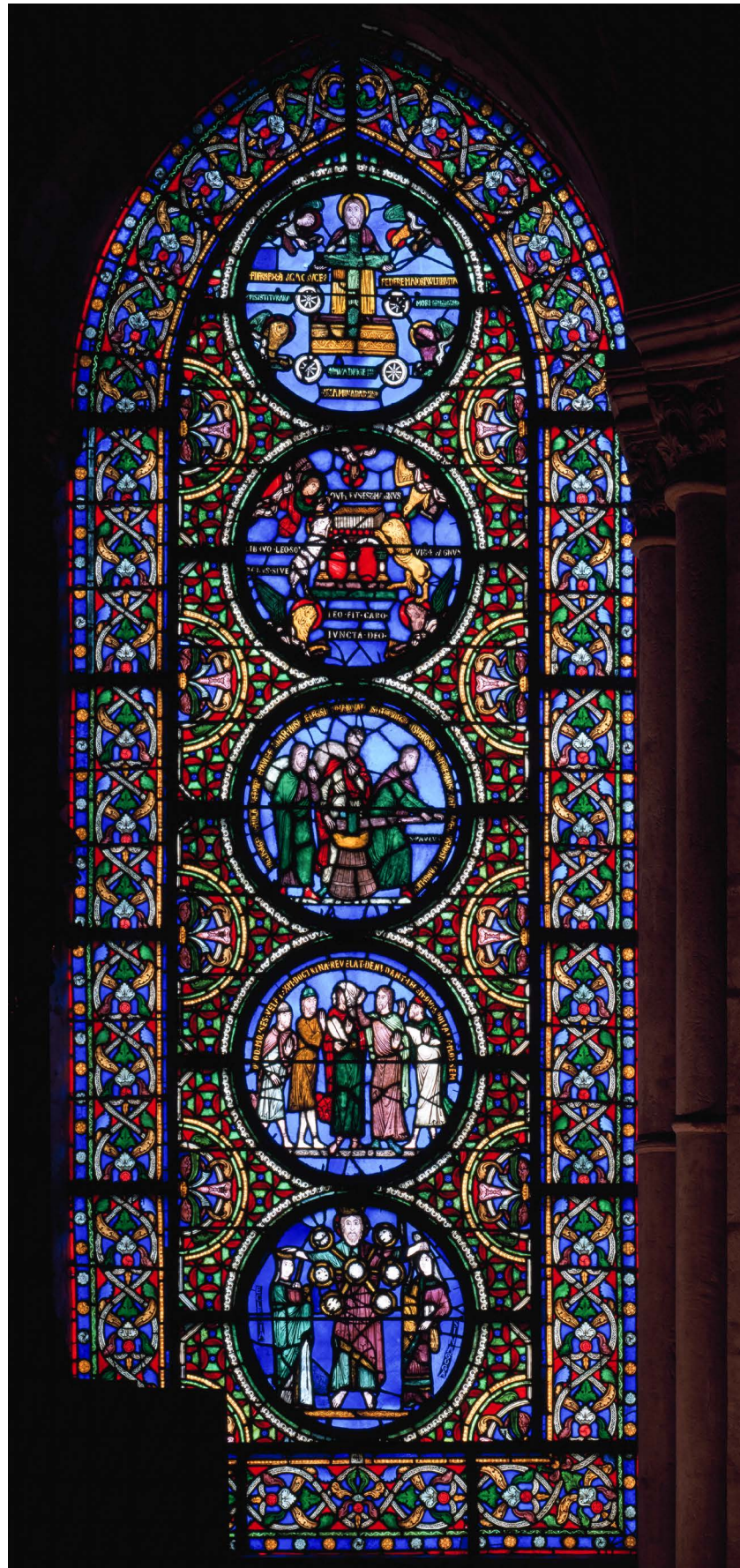
“Now, because [these windows] are very valuable on account of their wonderful execution and the profuse expenditure of painted glass [*vitri vestiti*] and sapphire glass [*saphirorum materia*], we appointed an official master craftsman for their protection and repair”⁷.

This is the second reference to *saphirus* glass in the work; its value and high cost are emphasized. It is,

Elite Art”, *The Art Bulletin*, xciii/4 (2011), pp. 399–422. The Panofskyan theses, on the other hand, have been criticized since the 1980s: see John Gage, “Gothic Glass: Two Aspects of a Dionysian Aesthetics”, *Art History*, v/1 (1982), pp. 36–58; Peter Kidson, “Panofsky, Suger and Saint Denis”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, L (1987), pp. 1–17. In the 1990s, several German scholars completely dismissed what they called “the Panofskyan paradigm”, rejecting any presence in Suger’s writings of the Areopagite’s theories and his metaphysics of light; see Cristoph Marksches, *Gibt es eine “Theologie der gotischen Kathedrale”? Nochmals: Suger von Saint-Denis und Sankt Dionys vom Areopag*, Heidelberg 1994; Bruno Reudenbach, “Panofsky et Suger de Saint Denis”, in *Histoire et théories de l’art*, Paris 1994, pp. 137–150; Andreas Speer, “Lux mirabilis et continua. Ammerkungen zum Verhältnis von mittelalterlicher Lichtspekulation und gotischer Glaskunst”, in *Himmelslicht. Europäische Glasmalerei*

im Jahrhundert des Kölner Dombaus (1248–1349), (exhibition catalogue, Cologne, 1998–1999), Hiltrud Westermann-Angerhausen ed., Cologne 1998, pp. 89–94; *Abt Suger von Saint-Denis. Ausgewählte Schriften*, Andreas Speer, Günther Binding eds, Darmstadt 2000; Martin Büchsel, “Licht und Metaphysik in der Gotik: noch einmal zu Suger von Saint-Denis”, in *Licht und Farbe in der mittelalterlichen Backsteinarchitektur des südlichen Ostseeraums*, Andreas Speer, Günther Binding eds, Berlin 2005, pp. 24–37. Speer’s theses have recently been fully accepted by some scholars: see for instance Cecily J. Hilsdale, “Translatio and Objecthood: The Cultural Agendas of Two Greek Manuscripts at Saint-Denis”, *Gesta*, LVI/2 (2017), pp. 151–178, sp. n. 23, but the debate is still open, as it is well shown in the latest contributions by Dell’Acqua, “L’auctoritas” (n. 1), p. 191 and Ernesto 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. 3, LVIII/1 (2017), pp. 23–43.

- 2 Michel Pastoureau, *Blue. The History of a Color*, Princeton/Oxford 2001 [*Bleu. Histoire d’une Couleur*, Paris 2000]; John Gage, *Colour and Culture*, London 1993; see also Michel Pastoureau, “L’Église et la couleur, des origines à la Réforme”, *Bibliothèque de l’École des chartes*, CXLVIII (1989), pp. 203–230; Michel Pastoureau, *Une histoire symbolique du Moyen-Âge occidental*, Paris 2004.
- 3 See Louis Grodecki, Catherine Brisac, Claudine Lautier, *Le vitrail roman*, Fribourg 1977; Enrico Castelnuovo, *Vetrate medievali*, Torino 1994; Madeline Caviness, *Stained Glass Windows*, Turnhout 1996; *La vetrata in occidente dal IV all’XI secolo. Il colore nel medioevo: Arte, simbolo, tecnica III*, Francesca Dell’Acqua, Romano Silva eds, Lucca 2001; *Le verre. Une moyen âge inventif*, exhibition catalogue (Paris, Musée de Cluny, 2017), Sophie Lagabrielle ed., Paris 2017; *Investigations in Medieval Stained Glass*, Elizabeth Carson Pastan, Brigitte Kurmann-Schwarz eds, Leiden 2019.
- 4 Historiographical questions on color in art historical literature are also addressed in John Gage, “Colour in History, Relative and Absolute”, *Art History*, 1 (1978), pp. 104–130; *idem*, “Color in Western Art, an Issue?”, *The Art Bulletin*, LXXII (1990), pp. 518–541; Heather Pulliam, “Color”, *Studies in Iconography*, XXIII (2012), pp. 3–14. See also the recent contribution by Vincent Debiais, “Colour as Subject”, in *Abstraction in Medieval Art*, Elina Gertsman ed., Amsterdam 2021, pp. 33–54; *A Cultural History of Color in the Medieval Age*, Carole P. Biggam, Kirsten Wolf eds, London / New York 2021.
- 5 Gage, “Gothic Glass” (n. 1); Kessler, “*Vitrum vestitum*” (n. 1).
- 6 Here and afterwards the quotes follow Panofsky, *Abbot Suger* (n. 1), pp. 52–53; emphases are mine.
- 7 *Ibidem*, pp. 76–77. Regarding the expression “*vitri vestiti*”, Panofsky refers to a passage from Cicero’s *De natura deorum* (II, 53, 132) and to the expression “*montes vestiti atque silvestres*” to be translated as “mountains clothed with forests” (see Cicero, *De natura deorum*, Harris Rackham ed., London/Cambridge 1961, pp. 250–251). I propose other possible parallels much closer to Suger: for instance, the expression “*colore vestio*” in Hugh of St Victor’s *De formatione archæ* (I, 1, 25): see Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, Cambridge 2008, p. 295. In Chapter 21 of Theophilus’s *Schedula diversarum artium* entitled “*De ornatu picturæ in vitro*”, Theophilus describes the pictorial decorations that can be added to the glass: “*Eodem modo facies campos ex albo clarissimo, cuius campi imagines vesties cum saphiro, viridi, purpura et rubicundo*”, “in the same way, you make grounds of very bright white and the figures against it you clothe in blue, green, purple and red”, see Theophilus, *De Diversis Artibus. The Various Arts*, Charles R. Dodwell ed., London 1961, p. 51. Here, Theophilus’ expression “*vestire cum colore*” referring to stained glass is very close to the “*vitri vestiti*” used by Suger.



moreover, the abbot's only mention of a specific color when speaking of the stained-glass windows, which are often cited and praised due to the admirable final result, but of which no other color is ever specified or celebrated. We can no longer fully appreciate the overall effect offered by the preponderance of the blue stained-glass background in the choir windows, given various structural changes. Specifically, the thirteenth-century enlargement, devastations during the French Revolution, which caused significant damage to the glass windows, and, finally, the recent removal of the surviving windows for conservation have jeopardized our overall perception of the interior space⁸.

Most of the other references to color in Suger's writings are related to precious stones: in *De administratione*, the abbot mentions the *nigredo* and *rubor* of the *sardonyx* when he describes the objects present at the time of his abbacy⁹. In chapter xxxiii, he describes the altar, which he had renewed. There, he placed a porphyry stone (*lapis porphireticus*), a material the abbot describes as appropriate for an altar of such importance, both for its size and color¹⁰.

Finally, in chapter xxiv, he mentions the now lost wall paintings of the nave, painted *tam auro quam preciosis coloribus*¹¹. All of the scarce references to color refer to stained glass or precious stones, therefore, to materials recognized for their colors and symbolism, with the exception of this last passage¹². While it might, strictly speaking, seem logical to integrate the references to colors with those related to light, considering color as the perception of the electromagnetic radiation which is, based on modern physics, light, this was neither obvious nor universally known in the Middle Ages (especially before the thirteenth century) when color had an ambiguous and debated status, oscillating between light and matter¹³. To fully understand the passages quoted above, it is therefore crucial to examine what the status of that debate was in the twelfth century.

Color: light or matter?

Color was considered an integral part of the visual act in the theories of vision produced in the Antiquity¹⁴, which still predominated in the Middle Ages,

especially before the thirteenth century¹⁵. If we also consider its intrinsic aspect of being perceived only thanks to light, color finds its place alongside light, which, in turn, ontologically participates in the divine as an expression denoting God as the light of the world ("*Ego sum Lux mundi*", John 8:12) and as the first expression pronounced by God ("*Dixitque Deus: 'Fiat lux'. Et facta est lux*", Gen 1:3). Between the fourth and fifth centuries, St Basil the Great held that light was an intrinsic property of matter and God's direct emanation¹⁶, followed by Saint Augustine who developed this thought arguing that God's *lux* (intended as the primary light) was distinguishable from the *luminaria* which derive secondarily from the heavenly bodies¹⁷. Thus,

8 Sophie Lagabrielle, "Les vitraux de Saint-Denis au musée des Monuments français", in *Un musée révolutionnaire. Le musée des Monuments français d'Alexandre Lenoir*, Geneviève Bresc-Bautier, Béatrice de Chancel-Bardelot eds, Paris 2006, pp. 112–119.

9 Panofsky, *Abbot Suger* (n. 1), pp. 78–79.

10 *Ibidem*, pp. 66–67.

11 *Ibidem*, pp. 42–43.

12 On precious stones' symbolism, see Christel Meier-Staubach, *Gemma Spiritalis*, München 1977; Gerda Friess, *Edelsteine im Mittelalter*, Hildesheim 1980; Martina Bagnoli, "The Stuff of Heaven. Materials and Craftsmanship in Medieval Reliquaries", in *Treasures of Heaven*, exhibition catalogue (Cleveland Museum of Art, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, British Museum, London, 2011), Martina Bagnoli et al. eds, New Haven / London 2010; Cynthia Hahn, *Strange Beauty: Issues in the Making and Meaning of Reliquaries, 400 – circa 1204*, University Park, PA 2012, Chapters 1–2, sp. pp. 38–44 on the importance of *varietas* and the collective meaning of stones; Herbert L. Kessler, "'Consider the Glass, It Can Teach You': the Medium's Lesson", in *Investigations* (n. 3), pp. 143–156.

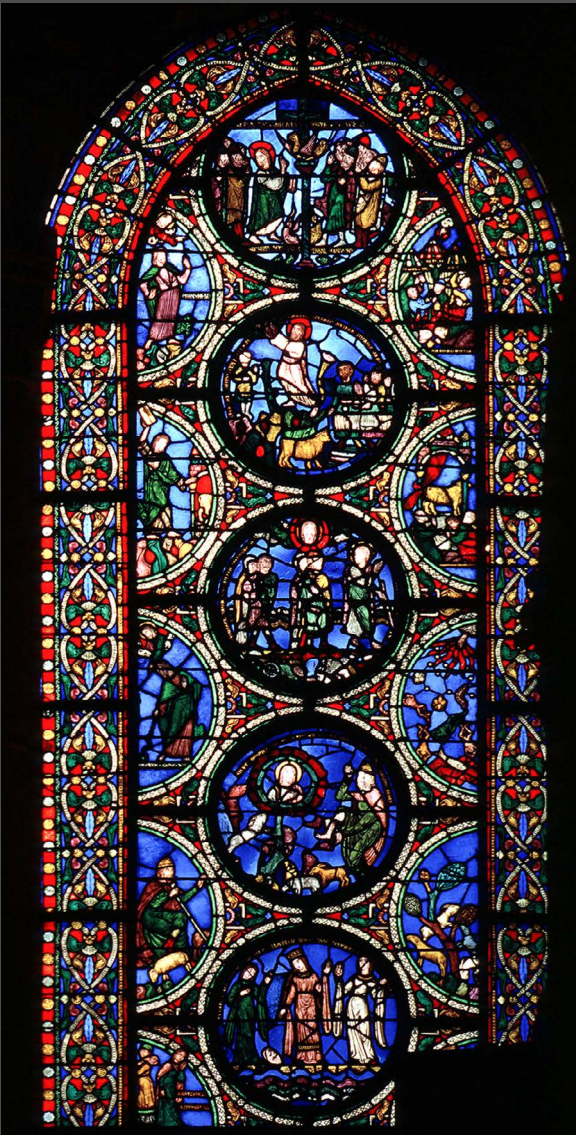
13 Michel Pastoureau, "Naissance d'un monde en noir et blanc. L'Église et la couleur des origines à la Réforme", in *idem*, *Une histoire symbolique* (n. 2), pp. 131–167.

14 On ancient and medieval theories of vision, see David C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler*, Chicago 1976. For an overview of color theories in relation to classical theories of visual perception, see Gage, *Colour and Culture* (n. 2) and Pastoureau, *Blue* (n. 2), pp. 27–31.

15 On the continuity of the theories developed in the Antiquity in the Middle Ages, see Pastoureau, *Une histoire symbolique* (n. 2), pp. 121–122; Michael J. Huxtable, *Colour, seeing, and seeing colour in medieval literature*, PhD thesis, (Durham University, supervisor: Prof. Corinne Saunders), Durham 2008, pp. 125ff [Available online at <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/2175/>]; A. Mark Smith, "Philosophy and Science: Scholastic Color Theory", in Biggam/Wolf, *Cultural History* (n. 4), pp. 25–44.

16 Saint Basil Bishop of Caesarea, *The Syriac Version of the Hexameron by Basil of Caesarea*, Robert W. Thomson transl. and ed., CSCO vols 550–551 (*Scriptores Syri* 222–223), Leuven 1995, Homily 6, pp. 85–112; transl. vol. 551, pp. 71–93. See discussion in Huxtable, *Colour* (n. 15), p. 29.

17 Augustine, *De Genesis ad litteram libri duodecim*, Joseph Zycha ed., CSEL vol. 28, part 1, 1894. Saint Augustine's thesis is discussed in Huxtable, *Colour* (n. 15), pp. 29–30.



2/ Moses window, Chapel of St Peregrinus, northern bay, stained glass, Abbey church of Saint-Denis, Saint-Denis, ca 1140–1144

3/ Fragment of the "Life of St Benedict" window, from Saint-Denis' abbey crypt, stained glass, second quarter of the twelfth century / Musée de Cluny (Paris), inv. Cl. 22758

the relationship of color to light entailed a sort of subordination of the former to the latter, due to the theological significance of light¹⁸, even if “the importance of color for medieval thought and imagination, in terms of perception and its place in the material culture of the period, should not be surrendered to its inferiority in relation to light”¹⁹. As stated by John Gage, “there was a general agreement that color was at best a secondary attribute of light, its most material aspect, accident rather than substance”²⁰.

At the same time, however, in medieval culture, and, in a broader sense, in the pre-Newtonian world, color was also considered to be something material that belonged to the colored thing. As a result, it also could not be detached from its materiality. This was all the more evident in the field of artistic production, where it was necessarily linked to the materiality of the coloring pigment.

In medieval culture, color was much more linked to aspects of materiality than it is today. The concept of color as the abstract idea of a hue, an optical phenomenon existing independently from things, prevalent in modern culture, did not exist in the pre-industrial world²¹. This does not mean that color was exclusively considered pure matter. It held an ambiguous status, which wavered from light to matter and changed according to the different fields of knowledge investigating it (optics, theology, art techniques), the historical period, and the various positions of the individual authors reflecting on the topic. Theories of vision developed in the Middle Ages were strongly indebted to the optical science of the classical age, especially to the Platonic theses and, from the thirteenth century on, to the Aristotelian ones²². The scarcity of references to color in the Holy Scripture, where the dichotomy between black and white and references to red as the color of the earth and blood emerge most frequently (with sporadic references to other colors, such as *purpureus* and *saphirus*, also considered among the noblest ones in the Middle Ages), was not an obstacle to a profound inquiry into the topic in medieval Christian culture. In the sixth century, in Gregory the Great’s *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, a metaphor expressing the importance of grasping the meaning of the Holy Scriptures

beyond its literal sense, used pictorial color as an example of the exterior of things, i.e. mere external appearance²³. Color was therefore understood as something that can be insidious and misleading, because it covers the truth of things by hiding it. This would also explain the supposed etymology of the word *color* as stemming from the verb *celare* (to hide)²⁴. Isidore of Seville, in the *Etymologiae*, dedicates a section of book 19 to colors, indirectly affirming materiality as their main characteristics. Although the etymology proposed for the word “color” refers to sun and fire (“*Colores dicti sunt, quod calore ignis vel sole perficiuntur*”)²⁵, colors are considered only in their nature as pictorial pigments or colorants for clothing, but not as optical phenomena. Isidore also addresses “the term ‘painted’ (*fucatus*), that is, daubed with some artificial color and possessing no credibility or truth”²⁶.

On the other hand, the Late Antique and early medieval centuries also witnessed the emergence of a new favorable opinion of brightness and the ability to incorporate or reflect light, belonging to colors and certain materials, according to the aesthetics of *varietas*, the definition and experience of which markedly changed in the post-Constantinian times when compared with Roman antiquity²⁷. Venantius Fortunatus, Aldhelm of Malmesbury, and Sedulius Scotus all celebrated the luminosity of buildings by stressing the splendor of the material in verses expressing appreciation for precious materials, colorful figures, and bright architecture lit up by daylight and filtered through stained-glass windows²⁸. The iconoclastic controversy in debating the role and importance of painted sacred images between the eighth and ninth centuries also involved considerations of and function attributed to color. For example, Pope Hadrian I, in a letter known as *Synodica* written in 785 to the Byzantine emperor Constantine V in defense of images, re-emphasized the function of images by stressing the principle of “*demonstrare invisibilia per visibilia*”²⁹. In doing so, he proposed an aesthetic evaluation of the images themselves, in which the power attributed to painted images was also emphasized by the suggestive power of color. The Council of Nicaea II (787 CE) declared that the images of Christ, of his

Mother, the figures of angels and saints could be made in “colors, pebbles [mosaics], or any other material that is fit”³⁰. Furthermore, the aesthetics of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages³¹ made explicit, perhaps for the first time, an awareness of aspects related to a work’s materiality and luminous and chromatic value, where colors were perceived as a vehicle of beauty³².

Neoplatonic philosophy, and especially Plotinus (ca 204–270 CE), expressed the concept through which every work of art found its *raison d’être* in acting as an instrument of knowledge of the *Noûs*. This included a reflection, as a form of weaker emanation, of the supreme Intelligence. Therefore, those who look at a depiction in a work of art shall have the opportunity to look at the subject represented in the foreground in detail, without the distortions of foreshortening or atmospheric perspective causing reduced size or color evanescence³³. As argued by André Grabar in his *Plotinus and the Origins of Medieval Aesthetics*, an image that seeks to reflect the supreme Intelligence should be limited to the colored surface, illuminated in all its parts, and free of shadows. For Plotinus, colors “are sort of lights”:

“Depth (βάθος) (of the being or the thing), is matter (ὕλη), and that is why matter is dark (σκοτεινή). The light which illuminates it is the form (λόγος); intelligence too sees the form. Seeing the form in a being, it judges that the depth of this being is a darkness situated under the light; likewise, the luminous eye, carrying its look on the light or the colours which are sort of lights (καὶ χροῶς φῶτα ὄντα), discerns the existence of the dark and material background hidden beneath the coloured surface”³⁴.

In the sixth century, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite took up the idea of the Christian conception

18 See also Michael J. Huxtable, “The Relationship of Light and Colour in Medieval Thought and Imagination”, in *On Light*, Kenneth P. Clark, Sarah Baccianti eds, Oxford 2014, pp. 25–44.

19 Huxtable, *Colour* (n. 15), p. 125.

20 Gage, *Colour and Culture* (n. 2), p. 70.

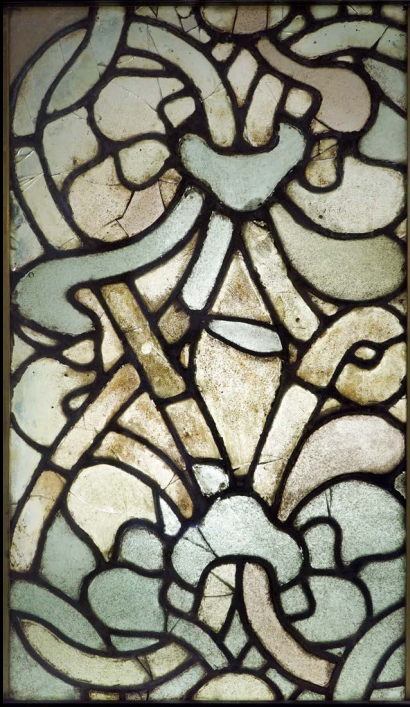
21 Riccardo Falcinelli, *Cromorama. Come il colore ha cambiato il nostro sguardo*, Torino 2017; Kastan, *On color*, New Haven 2018, pp. 1–19, 27.

22 Lindberg, *Theories* (n. 14), p. 87ff.

23 “For just as Sacred Scripture consists of words and its meaning, so too a picture consists of colors and its subject matter. And he is dumber than dumb who pays such close attention to the colors of the picture that he ignores the subject depicted! So if we embrace the words expressed in an exterior way and ignore their meaning, it is as if we were ignoring the subject depicted by concentrating only upon the colors”,

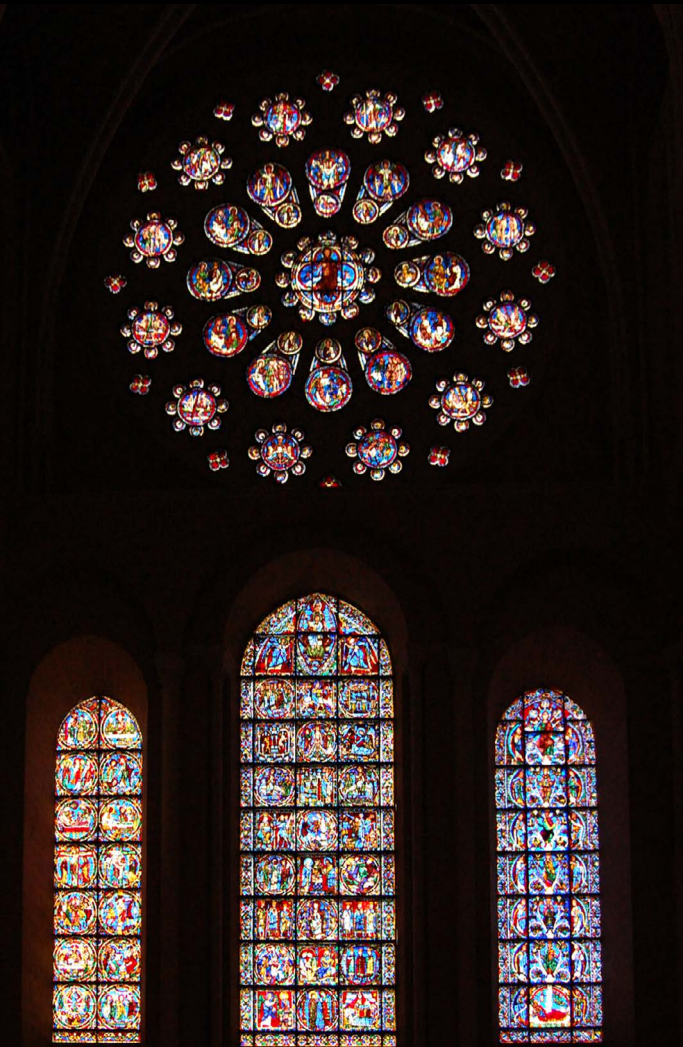
Gregory the Great, *On the Song of Songs*, Mark Del Cogliano ed., Collegeville, MN 2012.

- 24 Andres M. Kristol, *Color. Les langues romanes devant le phénomène de la couleur*, Bern 1978; Pastoureau, *L’Église et la couleur* (n. 2), p. 206; *idem*, *Une histoire symbolique* (n. 2), p. 133, 335 n. 311–312; Alois Walde, Johann B. Hofmann, *Lateinisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Heidelberg 1930–1954, s.v. “Color”, vol. 3, pp. 151ff; Alfred Ernout, Antoine Meillet, *Dictionnaire Etymologique de la langue latine*, Paris 1979, s.v. “Color”, p. 133.
- 25 Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum siue Originum libri XX* (CPL 1186), Library of Latin Texts electronic version, XIX, 17, 1.
- 26 Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, Oliver Berghof, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, Cambridge 2006, p. 380.
- 27 On this respect, see Mary Carruthers, “Varietas: A Word of Many Colours”, *Poetica: Zeitschrift Für Sprach- Und Literaturwissenschaft*, XL1/1–2 (2009), pp. 33–54.
- 28 Rosario Assunto, *La critica d’arte nel pensiero medioevale*, Milan 1961, p. 45; Francesca Dell’Acqua, *Illuminando colorat. La vetrata tra l’età tardo imperiale e l’Alto Medioevo: le fonti, l’archeologia*, Spoleto 2003; *eadem*, “Early History of Stained Glass”, in *Investigations* (n. 3), pp. 23–35.
- 29 These issues are addressed in Assunto, *Critica d’arte* (n. 28), pp. 55–58.
- 30 *Concilium Universale Nicaenum Secundum, Concilii Actiones VI–VII*, Erich Lamberz ed., (ACO II, 3.3), Berlin 2016; for the translation, see Daniel J. Sahas, *Icon and Logos: Sources in Eighth-Century Iconoclasm. An Annotated Translation of the Sixth Session of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (Nicaea, 787), Containing the Definition of the Council of Constantinople (754) and Its Refutation, and the Definition of the Seventh Ecumenical Council*, Toronto 1986, p. 179.
- 31 On the possibility of a medieval aesthetics, see the studies of Edgar De Bruyne, *Études d’esthétique médiévale*, Bruges 1946 [Paris 1988, 2nd ed.], especially the introductory pp. IX–XIX; Assunto, *La critica d’arte* (n. 28); Umberto Eco, *Arte e Bellezza nell’Estetica medioevale*, Milan 1987; Werner Beierwaltes, “*Negati affirmatio*” (n. 1); Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *Medieval Aesthetics* (History of Aesthetics, II), Warszawa/Paris 1970; *idem*, *A History of Six Ideas*, The Hague 1980, Chapter 4; Mariateresa Fumagalli, Beonio Brocchieri, *L’estetica medioevale*, Bologna 2002 and, finally, two recent contributions: Olivier Boulnois, Isabelle Moulin, *Le Beau et la Beauté au Moyen Âge*, Paris 2018; Anna Rodolfi, “Foreword to *Mind, Nature and Beauty in the Medieval Philosophy*”, *Aisthesis*, XI/1 (2018), pp. 3–5; Amalia M. S. Salvestrini, “Sull’estetica medioevale dopo Eco. Un percorso storiografico”, *Lebenswelt*, XIV (2019), pp. 1–21. However, some scholars have strongly denied it; see for example Andreas Speer, “Art as Liturgy: Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis and the Question of Medieval Aesthetics”, in *Roma magistra mundi. Itineraria culturae medioevalis*, Jaqueline Hamesse ed., Louvain-la-Neuve 1998, pp. 855–875; Andreas 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 *The Minds’Eye. Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, Jeffrey Hamburger, Anne-Marie Bouché eds, Princeton 2006, pp. 65–68.
- 32 “The beauty of colour was everywhere felt to be beauty pure and simple, something immediately perceptible and indivisible, and with no element of the relational as was the case with proportion”, Eco, *Arte e Bellezza* (n. 31) [*Art and Beauty*, Hugh Bredin transl., p. 52].
- 33 On this topic, see André Grabar, *Plotinus and the Origins of Medieval Aesthetics*, Adrien Palladino intr. and transl., Brno/Rome 2018, sp. pp. 64–67 [“Plotin et les origines de l’esthétique médiévale”, *Cahiers Archéologiques*, I (1945), pp. 15–34].
- 34 Plotinus, *Enneads*, II, 4, 5. Quoted in Grabar, “Plotinus” (n. 33), p. 67, emphases are mine.



4/ Grisaille window with decorative blankglazing, from the former Cistercian abbey church in Pontigny, stained glass, Troyes, Cité du Vitrail, ca 1200

5/ Western counterfaçade, stained glass windows, Chartres cathedral, ca 1150



of God and beauty from Christian Neoplatonism, as well as the idea from Plotinus and the Neoplatonists that absolute beauty radiates and produces emanations which are the source of earthly beauty³⁵. Considering the concept of emanation, this idea gives rise to a doctrine of beauty holding that invisible archetypal beauty can be contemplated and imitated by resorting to the forms of the visible world, because visible things are images of the invisible ones. The Plotinian and Pseudo-Areopagitic theory of emanation was based on the analogy of light. In fact, the Being, God, has the nature of light: He radiates as light, and therefore “Absolute Beauty” radiates beauty in the form of light. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, in *Divine Names*, defines Beauty as “the cause of harmony and splendor in everything” (“τῆς πάντων εὐαρμοστίας και ἀγλαΐας αἰτίον”)³⁶. This became a key concept in early medieval aesthetics, combining the canonical, Augustinian, and classical concepts of beauty as harmony, with the new idea of beauty as light and radiance³⁷. These concepts were taken up very thoroughly by John Scotus Eriugena in his commentary on the Areopagitic *corpus* written in the ninth century. He claimed visible forms “are not made for themselves, nor are they to be desired for themselves”, insofar as they are “images of invisible beauty”³⁸, and inform much of the reflection on images produced in the centuries from the ninth century onwards. In the twelfth century, Saint Bernard, in his famous *Apologia ad Guillelmum*, resumed the chromophobic positions that had appeared in the previous centuries. Opposing the excessive richness exhibited in sacred depictions inside churches, he stated: “*ostenditur pulcherrima forma sancti vel sanctae alicuius et eo creditur sanctior, quo coloratior*”³⁹. Color, in Bernard’s specific terminological usage, is once again considered deceptive⁴⁰. The controversy between Suger and Saint Bernard⁴¹ around 1127 thus included, although not explicitly, the opposition between two antithetical ways of understanding ecclesiastical decoration, light *versus* matter, which also encompassed two ways of understanding and considering color. This can be seen in the comparison between a stained-glass window from Saint-Denis and a monochrome Cistercian stained-glass window [Fig. 4].

A bright interior space?

Suger's writings do not openly reveal whether he considered color to be light or matter. Even though his celebration of the *lux mirabilis et continua* pervading the ambulatory of the abbey church and its joint appreciation of the vividly colored stained glass might suggest that he considered color in connection with light, this consequentiality has not always been as logical as it may seem at the first glance. In an article written in 1982, John Gage considered it "rather surprising that, in the *De consecratione*, Suger should characterise the effect of his circuit of ambulatory chapels [...] as one of light 'quo tota clarissimarum vitrearum luce mirabili et continua interiorum perlustrante pulchritudinem eniteret'"⁴², considering the overall low light in the internal space of the choir. This effect is similar to what we see inside the Chartres Cathedral, where the twelfth century stained-glass windows (today, those on the western façade almost exclusively remain) are dated somewhat later than those of Saint-Denis [Fig. 5]. From this point, Gage raised doubts about the general reliability of Suger's descriptions, wondering if "they were chiefly propaganda"⁴³, also in light of the fact that Suger chose not to make use of the widespread tradition of the "campos ex albo clarissimos" – that is, the white ground glass of which little material evidence remains today, chiefly the prophets windows series in the clerestory of the Augsburg Cathedral – described in Theophilus' *Schedula diversarum artium* [Fig. 6]⁴⁴. As a result, for Gage, the windows would have acted as filters for light rather than as a source of illumination⁴⁵. The celebration of the shining brightness of newly renovated churches was certainly a long-time *topos* of medieval patronage, often passed down through inscriptions and epigraphs starting in Late Antiquity, as was recently shown by Susanne Linscheid Burdich in her studies on the Sugerian *De Consecratione* inscriptions⁴⁶. However, this does not mean that Suger's celebration of the choir's brightness should be considered as a cliché, basing our judgment only on our modern perception of internal luminosity,

Ivanović, "Pseudo-Dionysius and the importance of sensible things", pp. 77–87); on the authorial question, dating, and genesis of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, see Ernesto S. Mainoldi, *Dietro 'Dionigi l'Areopagita'*, Rome 2018.

- 36 Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *Corpus Dionysiacum 1, De Divinis Nominibus*, IV, 7, Beate R. Suchla ed., Berlin 1990, p. 151; English transl. in Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, Paul Roemer ed., Colum Luibheid transl., Mahwah 1987, p. 76.
- 37 Eco, *Arte e Bellezza* (n. 31), pp. 42–44; Tatarkiewicz, *History* (n. 31), chapter 4.
- 38 John Scotus Eriugena, *Expositiones in Hierarchiam Coelestem*, Jean Barbet ed., I, ll. 509–519, p. 15.
- 39 "Just show them [scil. people] a beautiful picture of some saint. The brighter the colors, the saintlier he'll appear to them". Bernard of Clairvaux, *Apologia ad Guillelmum*, III, 28, ed. Library of Latin Texts. Transl. by David Burr, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/bernard1.asp> [last accessed 12.03.2021].
- 40 On these issues, Michel Pastoureau argues that in Bernard's vocabulary color is rarely associated with the notions of clarity and luminosity and is sometimes qualified as *turbidus*, *spissus*, *surdus*, *caecus*, although it is not easy to verify in which of Bernard's writings these occurrences appear; see Pastoureau, *L'Église et la couleur*, pp. 207–209; *idem*, "Les Cisterciens et la couleur au XIIe siècle", in *L'Ordre Cistercien et le Berry*, Pierre-Gilles Giraud ed., Bourges 1998 = *Cahiers d'archéologie et d'histoire du Berry*, CXXXVI (1998), pp. 111–135. The same themes are reiterated in Pastoureau, *Une histoire symbolique* (n. 2), pp. 134–136, 341, n. 317; *idem*, "Bernard de Clairvaux et la couleur", in *Clairvaux, l'aventure cistercienne*, Nicholas Dohrmann, Laurent Veyssiere eds, Troyes 2015, pp. 76–86. On Cistercian grisaille stained glass, see Helen J. Zakin, *French Cistercian Grisaille Glass*, New York 1979; Meredith P. Lillich, "French Grisaille Glass", in *Investigations* (n. 3), pp. 282–294.
- 41 In one of his epistles, St Bernard describes the Dionysian abbey as a "synagogue of Satan" and "a workshop of Vulcan", a place where there were more warriors and merchants than monks. The source is a Bernardian epistle, on which see Bernardus Claraeuallensis, *Epistulae*, Ep. 78, in *Bernardi opera*, Jean Leclercq, Henri M. Rochais eds, Rome 1974–1977, vols 7–8; Panofsky, *Abbot Suger* (n. 1), p. 3.
- 42 "[...] by virtue of which the whole [church] would shine with the wonderful and uninterrupted light of most luminous windows, pervading the interior beauty", Gage, "Gothic Glass" (n. 1), p. 39; Suger's quotation (and transl.) are taken from *De Consecratione*, IV, in Panofsky, *Abbot Suger* (n. 1), pp. 100–101.
- 43 Gage, "Gothic Glass" (n. 1), p. 40.
- 44 See n. 7.
- 45 Gage speculates that Suger would have drawn from Scotus Eriugena the Pseudo-Dionysian principles of negative symbolism and the consideration that the light of the higher heavenly immensities was also darkness, an inaccessible and incomprehensible light, because the rays of light become brighter the closer they get to earthly things, which is because they mix with the bodily vapors of the material world. Therefore, as Gage concludes, the luminous darkness of the choir windows at Saint-Denis became the concrete representation of God's presence in the church, a visual metaphor for the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius, according to which the last stage of contemplation of God is total darkness and the attainment of a mystical ignorance. Gage, "Gothic Glass" (n. 1), p. 42. Meredith Lillich, "Monastic Stained Glass: Patronage and Style", in *Monasticism and the Arts*, Timothy Verdon ed., Syracuse 1984, pp. 207–254.
- 46 Susanne Linscheid-Burdich, "Beobachtungen zu Sugers Versinschriften in *De administratione*", in *Abt Suger* (n. 1), pp. 112–146.

35 Tatarkiewicz, *Medieval Aesthetics* (n. 31), pp. 30–31. *Pseudo-Dionysius and Christian Visual Culture*, c. 500–900, Francesca Dell'Acqua, Ernesto S. Mainoldi eds, Cham 2020 (see sp. Filip



6/ Prophet Daniel window,
southern clerestory, stained glass,
Augsburg Cathedral, after 1132

which is debatable and relative, as it is calibrated on our habit of frequenting perfectly (or excessively) illuminated spaces. It is impossible not to take Suger's background into account in his comparison of the brightness of the Dionysian choir: that is, the dimness of a Romanesque or Carolingian building, the interior illumination of which was mainly entrusted to candlelight rather than natural light⁴⁷.

What is the *materia saphirorum*?

Although he celebrates the (colored) light in the Saint-Denis ambulatory when referring to the blue color of the stained glass, Suger, as seen above, often uses the expression *materia saphirorum*. Why, then, this insistence on "matter"? First of all, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of this locution. The three major modern editions of the Sugerian writings, those by Panofsky, Gasparri, and Speer and Binding, all propose different translations. Panofsky renders the term as "sapphire glass" throughout his work. However, the Gasparri edition alternates between "*verre de saphir*"⁴⁸ and "*matière de saphir*"⁴⁹. The edition by Speer and Binding, instead, translates both expressions into German with "*Saphirmaterial*", using a word closer to the Latin text that emphasizes the bond with the coloring material⁵⁰. In addition to the three critical editions of Suger's text, a new English translation of a selection of the abbot's works has recently been published. Once again, the expression *materia saphirorum* is translated in a contrasting way: in the first occurrence it is rendered as a synonym for blue glass ("sapphire-colored glass"); in the second, however, it is rendered with a more ambiguous "sapphire components"⁵¹. The only one to discuss this expression was Panofsky, who claimed *materia saphirorum* was a synonym for "blue glass". In support of this interpretation, he reported a similar occurrence in the *Schedula diversarum artium* by Theophilus⁵². In relation to Suger, Theophilus' *Schedula* is the source chronologically closest to discuss this locution. A search on the occurrences of the terms *saphirus/saphireus* in Theophilus shows that this expression was not a chromonym indicating a blue color hue but that it had a more specific meaning, since it always occurs in connection with brilliance, brightness, and transparent or luminous

materials: glass, silk, enamel, or a gem can be *sa(p)phir(e)us*, *-a* or *sa(p)phirinus*, *-a*, but a wall, a book painting, or an opaque fabric cannot; exceptions are rare⁵³. Similar results emerge from an analysis of other technical treatises, coeval or predating Theophilus, from the *Mappae Clavicula* to the twelfth addition in prose to Heraclius' *De coloribus et artibus Romanorum*⁵⁴.

On the other hand, *saphirus* as a color or a blue pigment does not appear in manuals dedicated to book painting, such as *De coloribus et mixtionibus* or the later *De arte illuminandi*⁵⁵. Thus, *materia saphirorum* probably means a transparent and bright blue hue, but it also refers to the stone called *saphirus*, with colors never being separated from materiality in medieval culture. However, fluidity existed between the semantic field of color and that of precious gems: *saphirus* could indicate both the precious stone and the color. Yet, *saphirus* as a precious stone was mainly used to indicate lapis lazuli, not the transparent gem now called sapphire (blue corundum). This is clearly shown by the tradition that goes back to classical Greek and Latin texts (the lapidary of Theophrastus and the *Naturalis Historia* of Pliny the Elder), persists in the early Middle Ages (Isidore of Seville), and crosses over the millennium (Marbode of Rennes) to reach the age of Suger⁵⁶. This traditional line of interpretation identifies *saphirus* as lapis lazuli, a precious stone with intense blue color and reputed to be as bright as gold because of its pyrite specks, but absolutely not transparent and used to produce the natural ultramarine blue pigment widely used in pictorial tradition as the color of the heavenly vault [Fig. 7]⁵⁷. However, many lapidaries provide conflicting indications⁵⁸ and it is plausible that blue



7 / A raw lapis lazuli stone

in *Patrologia Latina Cursus Completus*, Jacques-Paul Migne ed., Paris 1841–1864, lb. 95, col. 341D (hereafter *PL*).

- 54 Eraclius, *De coloribus et artibus Romanorum*, Chiara Garzya Romano ed., Bologna 1996, p. 45; *Mappae Clavicula. Alle origini dell'alchimia in Occidente*, Sandro Baroni, Giuseppe Pizzigoni, Paola Travaglio eds, Saonara 2013, nr. 56, 101, pp. 114–115, 144–145.
- 55 See Cristiana Pasqualetti, *Il libellus ad faciendum colores dell'Archivio di Stato dell'Aquila. Origine, contesto e restituzione del "De arte illuminandi"*, Florence 2011; Silvia B. Tosatti, *Trattati medievali di tecniche artistiche*, Milan 2007.
- 56 I only mention the most important authors who provided descriptions that allow the stone to be recognized in an incontrovertible manner. See Annibale Mottana, Michele Napolitano, "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*, s.9, VIII/3 (1997), pp. 151–234; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, Karl F. T. Mayhoff ed., Leipzig 1906, XXXVII, 40; Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, XVI, 9, 2, Library of Latin Texts. For Marbode of Rennes' *De lapidibus*, see Lapidari. *La magia delle pietre preziose*, Bruno Basile ed., Roma 2006, sp. ch. v ("De sapphiro"), pp. 46–47. According to Mottana and Napolitano, the association between the name *saphirus* and blue corundum would not have occurred before the middle of the eighteenth century; some clues allow, however, to date this association back to *De mineralibus* by Albertus Magnus in the mid-thirteenth century, although Albertus' explanation of stones is of somewhat controversial interpretation; see Albertus Magnus, *Mineralia*, Auguste Borgnet ed., Paris 1890, II, tr. 2, Chapters 17, 20. Finally, Christine Hediger, Brigitte Kurmann-Schwarz, "[...] et faciunt inde tabulas saphiri pretiosas ac satis utiles in fenestris. Die Farbe Blau in der 'Schedula' und in der Glasmalerei von 1100–1250", in *Zwischen Kunsthandwerk und Kunst: Die 'Schedula Diversarum Artium'*, Andreas Speer ed., Berlin 2014, pp. 256–273 believe that the association of the name *saphirus* with lapis lazuli or blue corundum was oscillating during the entire Middle Ages, but no ancient or medieval source known to me, in fact, allows the name *saphirus* to be traced as incontrovertibly to blue corundum as it is possible, conversely, for lapis lazuli. I have further investigated this topic in Alberto Virdis, "Suger di Saint-Denis e la materia saphirorum: un'indagine fra crononimi medievali, gemme e pigmenti", *Spolia*, XVII/7 n.s. (2021), pp. 1–49.
- 57 François Delamare, *Bleus en poudres. De l'art à l'industrie, 5000 ans d'innovations*, Paris 2008.
- 58 See Friess, *Edelsteine* (n. 12), pp. 25–27; Hediger/Kurmann-Schwarz, "[...] et faciunt" (n. 56), pp. 268–269.

47 Philip Ball, *Universe of Stone. Chartres Cathedral and the Triumph of the Medieval Mind*, London 2008, p. 238.

48 Françoise Gasparri, *Suger. Oeuvres. I*, Paris 2008, pp. 122–123.

49 *Ibidem*, pp. 150–151.

50 *Abt Suger* (n. 1), pp. 329, 363. However, no discussion of the translation is provided neither here nor in the Gasparri edition.

51 Richard Cusimano, Eric Whitmore, *Selected Works of Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis*, Washington, D.C. 2017, pp. 100 and 114.

52 Panofsky, *Abbot Suger* (n. 1), p. 171.

53 Theophilus, *De diversis* (n. 7), II, 12, pp. 44–45; II, 14 p. 46; II, 21, p. 51. Outside the domain of artistic techniques, it is worth mentioning the *pallia saphirina*, silken cloaks referred to by Notker of St Gall in the *Gesta Karoli Magni*, SS. Rer. Germ. n.s. 12, II, 9, EMGH ed., as well as the *cappa oloserica saphirei sive azurei coloris* cited by Bede, "De vestimentorum donatione",

8/ Étienne-Éloi Labarre, *Escrain de Charlemagne*, watercolor drawing, 1794 / Cabinet des Estampes, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Paris), inv. Le 38C-fol.

9/ Top jewel of the *Crista* or *Escrain de Charlemagne*, beryl (intaglio), gold (mount), sapphires (setting), beads (frame), ca 90 CE (intaglio), ca 870–877 (setting) / Cabinet des Médailles, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Paris), inv. 58.2089

corundum (modern sapphire), or any other blue transparent stone, may have been designated as *saphirus*, due to chromatic analogy (alongside the name of *hyacinthus* that is also attested in sources to indicate transparent and bright blue gemstones)⁵⁹. Nevertheless, the twelfth-century lapidary of Marbode, which was very successful throughout the Western Europe and beyond, is forthright in defining *saphirus* as “not transparent”, confirming its identification as lapis lazuli⁶⁰.

Thus, the association of lapis lazuli with transparent and luminous stained-glass windows was not linked to the quality of its transparency, but rather to the meaning attributed to it in the Scriptures and medieval exegesis. The Scriptures identified *saphirus* as the floor on which God rests his feet and the color of the sky when it is clear, as in Exodus 24:10 (“*sub pedibus eius quasi opus lapidis sapphirini et quasi ipsum caelum, cum serenum est*”) and Ezekiel’s vision (“*super firmamentum, quod erat imminens capiti eorum, quasi aspectus lapidis sapphiri*” Ezek. 1, 26). The stone also appears in the description of the foundations of the Heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. 21, 19). Of the eighth-century exegetes, Bede expounds the characteristics of *saphirus* in the *Explanatio Apocalypsis* based on the Old Testament passages cited and associates the color of the precious stone with that of the clear sky and the glory of the Lord (“*gloria Domini in hoc colore consistat*”)⁶¹. Rabanus Maurus conveyed this concept in a similar way in his *De universo* (xvii, 7)⁶². At the beginning of the twelfth century, Hugh of St Victor, in the *Didascalicon*, reiterated the comparison between the *saphirus* and the sky by reversing the Old Testament metaphor handed down by the early medieval exegetical tradition: “*Quid jucundius ad videndum coelo cum serenus est, quod splendet quasi saphirus?*”⁶³. For Hugh of St Victor, living in twelfth-century Paris, it is the sky that shines like *saphirus* rather than the other way around⁶⁴. Suger, however, in several passages of *De administratione*, when he describes the goldsmithing objects which were a part of the abbey church’s liturgical furnishings, mentions both *saphiri* and *jacincti*, suggesting that he considered the two stones to be distinct⁶⁵. It is difficult to interpret exactly which stone Suger referred to as *saphirus* and what impact the tradition of lapidaries had on him. As a result, we can

only assert that biblical and exegetical tradition – according to which *saphirus* likely meant lapis lazuli as well – may have played an important role.

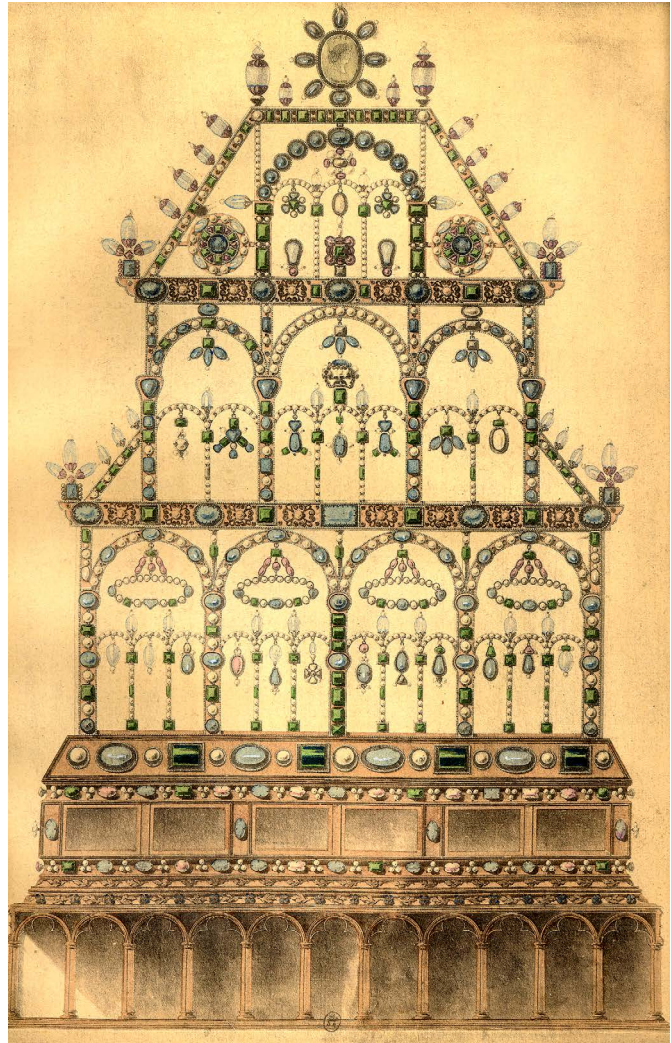
Anagogical colors

According to Suger, the color of the stained-glass windows in the choir was linked to the significance of light as much as of matter. If *saphirus* was likely the biblical stone of the “color of the sky when it is clear”, and if the “saphired” stained-glass windows carried the significance biblical exegesis attributed to the stone of the same name, the stained-glass windows could be invested both with the aspects linked to the matter of stone and with its meaning as a vehicle for celestial light. Stained-glass windows, although they dampened the natural light, propagated colored light inside the church. This, in the wake of Pseudo-Dionysius, could be understood as a divine similitude⁶⁶: “He [God] may also be represented as light,” writes the Areopagite in the *Celestial Hierarchy*⁶⁷.

Concerning the dispute on the actual influence the ideas of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite had on Suger, I believe it is possible to assert that the considerations of Beierwaltes⁶⁸, together with recent re-evaluations by Poirel, Dell’Acqua, and Mainoldi⁶⁹ fully accepted here, support the Panofskyan thesis by adding new elements and re-examining the whole debate, not just by reiterating the so-called “Panofskyan paradigm”⁷⁰. These scholars have clearly answered the questions initially proposed by Kidson, later picked up and expanded by many German scholars, including Reudenbach, Marksches, Büchsel⁷¹, and especially Andreas Speer⁷² who minimized or ruled out the existence of any relationship between Suger and the Neoplatonic thought of the Areopagite and Scotus Eriugena. The debate, too extensive to be examined on these pages, has involved the possibility of a medieval aesthetics⁷³ and, as far as Suger’s texts are concerned, has considered these to be only aimed at the realization of cultic-liturgical interest⁷⁴. According to Beierwaltes, “this, however, does not exclude in any way that Suger’s description of the church building and of the furnishings [...] ‘symbolically’ transcends, *precisely* in reference to their

liturgical function, their ‘concrete existence’ – as in Dionysian-Eriugenian theophanic thought”⁷⁵. In light of Beierwaltes’ remarks, it is possible to deduce a few things on the role and importance of color in Suger from the combination of textual references and a study of the works of art present in Saint-Denis. The famous passage from *De administratione*, where Suger describes his meditative experience in front of the beauty of the multicolored gems of the St Eloy Cross and the so-called *Crista* or *Escrein de Charlemagne*⁷⁶ once placed upon the golden altar⁷⁷ [Figs 8–9], represents a clear example of how the anagogic movement can be seen

- 59 See Albertus Magnus, *Book of minerals*, Dorothy Wyckoff transl. and ed., Oxford 1967, pp. 97–98, 289 [s.v. “Sapphire (corundum)”]; Meier Staubach, *Gemma Spiritualis* (n. 12), p. 157ff.
- 60 Gad Freudenthal, Jean-Marc Mandosio, “Old French into Hebrew in Twelfth-Century Tsarfat: Medieval Hebrew Versions of Marbode’s Lapidary”, *Aleph*, XIV/1 (2014), pp. 11–187.
- 61 Bede the Venerable, *Explanatio Apocalypsis*, III, 37, Library of Latin Texts.
- 62 *PL* 111, cols 465–472.
- 63 *PL* 176, col. 820D.
- 64 Rudolph, “Inventing” (n. 1).
- 65 For instance in Chapter xxxi, see Panofsky, *Abbot Suger* (n. 1), p. 54.
- 66 Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing* (n. 1), p. 201.
- 67 Engl. transl., Ps.-Dion., *The Celestial Hierarchy*, II, 3, in *Complete Works* (n. 36), p. 149.
- 68 Beierwaltes, *Eriugena* (n. 1).
- 69 Poirel, “Symbolice et anagogice” (n. 1); Dell’Acqua, “L’auctoritas” (n. 1); Mainoldi, “L’abate Sugerio” (n. 1).
- 70 See n. 1.
- 71 Kidson, “Panofsky” (n. 1); Reudenbach, “Panofsky” (n. 1); Markschies, *Gibt es eine Theologie* (n. 1); Büchsel, “Licht und Metaphysik” (n. 1).
- 72 Andreas Speer, “Vom Verstehen mittelalterlichen Kunst”, in *Mittelalterliches Kunsterleben nach Quellen des 11.–13. Jahrhunderts*, Andreas Speer, Günther Binding eds, Stuttgart 1993, pp. 13–52; Speer, “*Lux mirabilis et continua*” (n. 1); *idem*, “Is there a theology?” (n. 31).
- 73 See *supra* n. 31.
- 74 Speer and Binding, in their latest critical edition of Suger’s writings (*Abt Suger*, see n. 1), also believe that the failure in finding literal quotations from the *Corpus Dionysianum* and the attribution of many of the inscriptions created by the abbot for the basilica to a repertoire of Late Antique origin is the evidence of the absence of a relationship between the Areopagitic-Eriugenian tradition and the thought of the French abbot. See Beierwaltes’ response to Speer, “Vom Verstehen” (n. 72), in Beierwaltes, *Eriugena* (n. 1), pp. 152–158.
- 75 *Ibidem*, p. 157.
- 76 Danielle Gaborit Chopin, *Le trésor de Saint-Denis*, Paris 1991.
- 77 The *Crista* was a non-figurative composition of colored gems and gold, probably to be understood as a reproduction of the Heavenly Jerusalem. On the functions and interpretations of the *Crista*, see Jean Hubert, “L’Escrein dit de Charlemagne au trésor de Saint-Denis”, *Cahiers Archéologiques*, IV (1949), pp. 71–77; see also Josiane Barbier, “Nouvelles remarques sur l’Escrein de Charlemagne”, in *Bulletin de la société Nationale des Antiquaires de France* (1995), pp. 254–265.



from a new angle here. The *varietas colorum* can be seen as a “spark” that, in the act of contemplation, leads to the ascent towards the divine:

“Unde, cum ex dilectione decoris domus Dei aliquando multicolor gemmarum speciositas ab extrinsecis me curet devocaret, sanctarum etiam diversitatem virtutum, de materialibus ad immaterialia transferendo, honesta meditatio insistere persuaderet, videor videre me quasi sub aliqua extranea orbis terrarum plaga, quae nec tota sit in terrarum faece, nec tota in celi puritate demorari, ab hac etiam inferiori ad illam superiorem anagogico more Deo donante posse transferri”.

“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”⁷⁸.

Following the interpretation provided by Jean-Claude Bonne⁷⁹, anagogy in Suger retains a theoretical “Greek”, or rather pseudo-Areopagitic, foundation, according to which matter ontologically retains something of the divine principle it descends from, rather than being an earthly element to get rid of to rise to the higher world.

The intelligible world is already present in an immanent way inside the tangible, sensible things of the world, where it comes from above, by emanation; therefore, anagogy becomes a process aiming to reach invisible things through the visible ones, taking possession of the latter and not abandoning these. This idea is also applicable to stained-glass windows, which can be interpreted as an imitation of a composition of multicolored precious stones. Color, divine light perceivable through sight, finds a tangible form in stained glass, experienced with the senses. It becomes a physical support, ontologically linked to the divine, which one tends to return to following an upward motion. Materiality, therefore, emerges in its disruptive importance, because, understood as such, stained glass is not only a *filter* the role of which is to illuminate the church by allowing light to come in, but also has value in its own specific *materiality*. By imitating a composition of gems

it, in fact, recalls and takes on the significance of the precious material it imitates, acquiring the properties and theological meanings that precious stones were usually given in exegesis. Exegetical interpretations for *saphirus* included: a metaphor for the heavenly vault, house of the Lord, color of divine glory, foundation of the city of God in the Heavenly Jerusalem. As already Hans Sedlmayr pointed out:

“[...] the greatest conceivable increase in luminosity in a closed interior space [...] is not produced by the reflection of light, but by the diaphanous nature of the glass, opaque because it is intensely colored. In this apparent ‘self-luminosity’, the glass windows are comparable only to polished gemstones caught in the light, and, similarly, their lighting effect merely visually conveys something mysterious – even without knowledge of the coeval symbology of light”⁸⁰.

In Chapter 15 of the *Celestial Hierarchy*, Pseudo-Dionysius describes the different images used in the Scriptures to represent angels defined as “heavenly substances”. Sometimes, he says, they are presented in human form, sometimes they appear as animals or as natural elements. Among the different forms and aspects assumed by the “celestial substances”, metals and multicolored stones are mentioned:

“The Word of God furthermore attributes to the heavenly beings the form of bronze, of electrum, of multicolored stones [...]. With regard to the multicolored stones (τάς δέ τῶν λίθων πολυχρωμάτους ιδέας), these must be taken to work symbolically as follows: white for light, red for fire, yellow for gold, green for youthful vitality. Indeed you will find that *each form carries an uplifting explanation of the representational images* (ἀναγωγικὴν τῶν τυπωτικῶν εἰκόνων ἀνακάθαρσιν)”⁸¹.

“Celestial substances” can, therefore, take on the appearance of precious stones, and there is an anagogical explanation for each differently-colored stone. The idea of material things anagogically referring to invisible things is clearly expressed in the text. In this sense, Suger’s meditation in front of the gems of the Cross of St Eloy and of the *Crista* seems to put the aforementioned passage into practice. It also seems to confirm Bonne’s interpretation, claiming that Suger dealt to a great extent with the “Greek” lesson of anagogy, celebrating not so much the ascent of the soul beyond

the tangible world, but rather, on the contrary, the descent of the heavenly world into the choir of the basilica, in a sort of terrestrial and human anticipation of the Heavenly Jerusalem.

Critics have mostly ignored this textual reference: there is no discussion of it in any of the three editions of Suger's writings, and the passage from *De administratione* referred to here is never connected with chapter xv, 7 of the *Celestial Hierarchy*. I believe it is undeniable that the Areopagitic reference lies behind this much-commented Sugerian passage. The allusion made by the abbot to the anagogy in the Dionysian sense is another probative element of the direct links between Suger and the Areopagitic-Eriugenic tradition. These links are, therefore, based not only on a semantic connection but also on a textual-lexical one⁸². It is a matter of further investigation to ascertain whether the influence of Eriugena's translation on Suger is greater than that of Hugh of St Victor's commentary to the *Celestial Hierarchy*, or if the opposite is true, since both were vehicles for the diffusion of the *Corpus Areopagiticum* in the Latin West⁸³.

Conclusions

Most likely, Suger's main concern was not to create a basilica flooded with light, so he chose not to have white-ground (colorless) glass made for the new choir, thus breaking with the tradition of his time which is well-attested by coeval sources [Fig. 6]. Suger was interested in the light penetrating the church becoming visible, and in some way tangible, through the colored glass. This glass, in its materiality, imitated a wall of precious stones, recalling the walls of the Heavenly Jerusalem. Therefore, the church had never been flooded in light, especially since, when Suger wrote, the narrow Carolingian nave was still standing. Nevertheless, in whatever way its internal brightness was perceived at the time of the abbot, it cannot be denied that this specific view is present today when looking into the church, in the direction of the stained-glass windows, at Saint-Denis, or at Chartres, or in many contemporary early Gothic cathedrals [Figs 5, 10, 11]⁸⁴. Stained-glass windows confer the distinct impression of standing within a colored space: bright or dim, depending on

subjective and personal perception, but undoubtedly colored. This is the effect Suger was looking for: to allow light to penetrate the basilica, in the form of color, through the polychrome stained-glass windows, in order to recreate the same *speciositas*⁸⁵ effect as the precious stones of the *Crista* or the Cross of St Eloy – earthly, material, and concrete all at once, but also spiritual because of their luminosity. Both stained glass and colored gems imitating the walls of Heavenly Jerusalem⁸⁶ triggered a process of anagogic ascent, *de materialibus*

78 Suger, *De administratione*, xxxiii; English translation in Panofsky, *Abbot Suger* (n. 1), pp. 63–65.

79 Jean-Claude Bonne, "Pensée de l'art et pensée théologique dans les écrits de Suger", in *Artistes et philosophes: éducateurs?*, Christian Descamps ed., Paris 1994, pp. 13–50.

80 Hans Sedlmayr, *Das Licht in seinen künstlerischen Manifestationen*, Mittenwald 1979, p. 23. Author's translation. I would like to thank Adrien Palladino for his help in interpreting and translating the original text.

81 Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *Corpus Dionysiacum* II, *De Coelesti Hierarchia*, Günter Heil, Adolf M. Ritter eds, Berlin 1991, pp. 56–57; English translation in Ps.-Dion., *Celestial Hierarchy*, xv, 7, in *Complete Works* (n. 36), p. 188. Emphases are mine.

82 Speer and Binding's analysis does not mention this textual reference. Moreover, in the glossary of the critical edition placed at the end of the text and subdivided by themes the words "anagogia" or "mos anagogicus" are not discussed, see *Abt Suger* (n. 1).

83 Denys l'Aréopagite et sa postérité en Orient et en Occident, Ysabel De Andia ed., Paris 1997; *Die Dionysius-Rezeption im Mittelalter*, Tzotcho Boiadjev, Georgi Kapriev, Andreas Speer eds, Turnhout 2000.

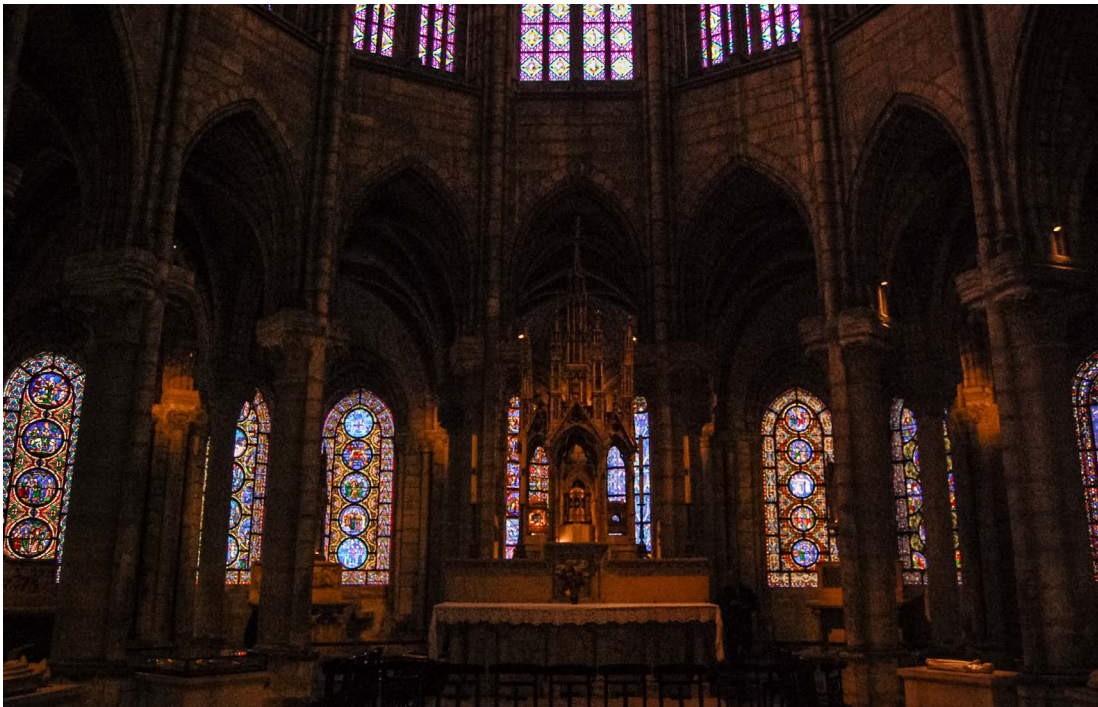
84 For a critical reassessment of the problems of natural lighting in the churches of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages seen as a scholarly creation, and on the questions related to the architectural *ambiance* in the churches' interiors, see Nicolas Reveyron, "Ambiance lumineuse et architecture: les antécédents antiques des formules romanes et gothiques", *Hortus artium medievalium*, xxvi (2020), pp. 201–212. On Chartres cathedral and the new critical acquisitions emerged from the recent restoration works, see the two special monographic issues of the *Bulletin Monumental*, CLXIX/1 (2011) and CLXXIII/3 (2015), as well as the collective volume *Chartres. Construire et restaurer la cathédrale, XIe–XXIe s.*, Arnaud Timbert ed., Villeneuve d'Ascq 2014.

85 Dominique Poirel has found a precise reference in the term *speciositas* that reveals in all likelihood a Dionysian-Eriugenic origin, since it is almost non-existent among the Latin Fathers, when compared to the six occurrences in Eriugena, three of which are found in the translation of *De coelesti hierarchia* that was also used by Hugh of St Victor for his commentary. As proof of the fact that the use of this term to indicate the concept of beauty was unusual, Hugh, in his commentary on the *Celestial Hierarchy*, found it necessary to give an explanation, using a synonym: "*speciositatis, id est pulchritudinis*". See Hugh of St Victor, *Super Ierarchiam Dionisii* (*Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Medievalis*, 178), Dominique Poirel ed., Turnhout 2015, p. 505; Poirel, "Symbolice" (n. 1), p. 159.

86 Meier Staubach, *Gemma Spiritalis* (n. 12), pp. 67–138; Bagnoli, *Stuff of Heaven* (n. 12); Hahn, *Strange Beauty* (n. 12); Herbert L. Kessler, *Experiencing Medieval Art*, Toronto 2019, pp. 39–40.



10/View of the choir with artificial lights, Abbey church of Saint-Denis



11/View of the choir, Abbey church of Saint-Denis

ad immaterialia in those who looked at the choir windows and, in particular, in the monks (“*electis sacerdotibus*”) to whom the narrative in the stained glass was addressed⁸⁷. In this process, material things, precious stones, gold, and glass were not a burden to be freed from, but a fundamental legacy of divine presence in earthly things and an emanation of God himself. This was the final goal

the monks aspired to through meditation. The stained-glass windows were, by segmenting the primordial light into many different colors, a clear metaphor of the fragmentation of the One into the infinite hierarchy of inferior creatures that “luminously” participated in the divine principle.

Barvy v Sugerově Saint-Denis: mezi hmotou a světlem

Článek zkoumá vztah opata Sugera k realizaci vitráží v Saint-Denis z hlediska funkce barvy pro vnitřní světelnost chóru. Cílem článku je zaplnit mezeru v již poměrně rozsáhlé bibliografii na toto téma. Většina studií se totiž doposud soustředila jen na opatovo velebení vnitřního jasu chóru ve spisech jako *De administratione* a *De consecratione*, které byly často čteny v souvislosti s novoplatónskou metafyzikou světla, kterou rozvinul Pseudo-Dionýsius Areopagita. Tato souvislost, kterou v roce 1946 popsal Erwin Panofsky, však byla v poslední době zpochybněna několika badateli, zejména z německého prostředí, což svědčí o stále otevřené a živé kritické diskusi na toto téma. Zmínky o barvách v Sugerových spisech, obzvláště v *De Administratione*, se vztahují buď k drahokamům, které zdobily klášterní mobiliář, nebo k vitrážím, u nichž opat oslavoval především modrou barvu pozadí, pro niž používal výraz *materia saphirorum*. Tento výraz, v největších Sugerových vydáních různě překládaný, odkazuje na dvojí povahu barvy ve středověké kultuře: jako světla i hmoty. Za účelem zasazení Sugerových spisů do řádného kontextu předkládá tento článek stručný přehled hlavních zmínek o barvách v písemné tradici od šestého do dvanáctého století, od Řehoře Velikého po svatého Bernarda z Clairvaux. Opat Suger chtěl použitím výrazu

materia saphirorum pravděpodobně vyzdvihnout jak samotný materiál použitý k výrobě zářivě modrého a vzácného skla – novinku v tehdejší sklářské tradici zvyklé spíše na bílé pozadí vitráží –, tak jeho inherentní jas. Tento pojem v sobě tedy odráží oba významy slova „saphirus“, které je současně chromonymem (hojně používaným ve středověkých pramenech, zejména v Theophilově *Schedula diversarum artium*) a pojítkem mezi sklem a drahým kamenem zvaným „saphirus“. Ten ale ve středověké tradici mohl odkazovat na jasně modrý a průhledný korund (dnes nazývaný „safír“) i na lapis lazuli (který se objevuje v Písmu, v řeckých lapidáriích, u Plinia Staršího a nakonec i v Marbodově *De lapidibus* z konce 11. století). Tento kámen byl v biblické exegezi chápán jako metafora nebeské klenby (Beda, Rabanus, Hugo ze Svatého Viktora) a objevuje se také v popisu základů Nebeského Jeruzaléma. Při opěvování *speciositas* mnohobarevných drahokamů spojovaných se zdmi Božího města, jejichž pozemskou replikou byly barevné vitráže, opat Suger poukazuje na schopnost drahých kamenů vyvolat anagogický vzestup od věcí pozemských k věcem neviditelným (*De adm.*, xxxiii). Opakuje přitom konkrétní pasáž Areopagitovy *Nebeské hierarchie* (xv, 7), která doposud nikdy nebyla dána do souvislosti se slavnou pasáží *De administratione*.