

## RECENSIONES

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Book review of / Recensión de: *El equipamiento del altar medieval. De la materia a la luz* (Codex Aquilarensis nº 38). Aguilar de Campoo: Fundación Santa María La Real/Centro de Estudios del Románico, 2022, 344 pp., 133 ilus. [ISBN: ISSN 0214-896X].

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The cover image of this volume, the late-fifteenth-century panel painting of the Mass of Saint Giles at the National Gallery in London, is well known for its depiction of the high altar at Saint-Denis. This image, together with the volume's subtitle, "From Matter to Light," calls to mind the long historiographic debate on the role of Pseudo-Dionysian thought in Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis's writings about, and conception of, his abbey church and the objects he commissioned for it. And indeed, one of the articles included in this volume, "Figurative Language in Abbot Suger's Reflections on the Main Altar" by Alberto Virdis (117-40), retreads this ground. Though perhaps too reliant on Umberto Eco's schemata of medieval aesthetics, Virdis points to specific features of Suger's language, notably the use of *species* and *speciosus*, as evidence for a real familiarity with Neoplatonic ideas.

This article, however, is the only one to engage with this debate, and while Saint-Denis makes occasional appearances throughout the other contributions, it is not the focus. Instead, the overall purpose of this volume, which stems from a conference organized in Aguilar de Campoo in 2022, is to consider the high altar of medieval churches as a site where things happen and art is displayed. To this purpose, the volume combines theoretically-engaged reflections on the altar with a sampling of work on altar decorations in Iberia especially.

In the first category, Pierre Alain Mariaux's contribution, "Exposer à l'autel" (35-57), uses a review of recent work on reliquaries' presence on or near altars to revise the concept of "Schaulust" or "desire to see" in late-medieval piety (esp. 47). Mariaux proposes instead a history of multiplying framing devices or "dispositifs," from choir screens to rock crystals, developing into a tunable system of visual (but not always visible) stimuli. More speculative, more anecdotal, but more innovative is Aden Kumler's text, "Altar as Atelier in the Middle Ages" (141-68), which explores creative acts occurring on the altar table, in analogy to the consecration itself. Focusing the bulk of her attention on legal, performatives acts, from donations to manumission, she also discusses formal or plastic processes. These include the arrangement of eucharistic hosts into temporary shapes prior to communion (151-156), adding to her ongoing work on hosts as created things of art in their own right.

Least convincing of the contributions in this category, at least in this stage of the research, is César García de Castro Valdés's study of "Intercambios léxicos entre orfebrería y teología" (13-34). Looking for vocabularies of fire and metalsmithing in sacramental theology, the survey identifies interesting overlaps, notably in Apocalypse commentaries, but the net is cast too wide, and the question too overdetermined, for the result to be more than superficial; as an announcement of future work, however, it is promising. Marcello Angheben's study, "Les trois images canoniques du Christ dans le décor des autels médiévaux" (59-87) is likewise situated at the beginning of a research project and falls prey to similar problems. Angheben's effort to interrogate anew those all-too-familiar images (Christ in Majesty, the Crucifixion, the Virgin and Child) in the eucharistic context is nonetheless laudable, and his investigations are more firmly grounded in the liturgy

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and medieval theology than were those the 1990s. Most engaging, and most surprising, is the discussion of the Virgin Mary as priest.

The remaining studies in this volume, for the most part, trace specific typologies of altar decoration within a defined time period and region, largely in Iberia. These include a fascinating sub-group of Catalan painted altar frontals preserved with side panels, discussed in Marc Sureda i Jubany's "Conjuntos de antependios y laterales" (90-116). After an informative discussion of standpoints and viewing angles for the side of the altar, Sureda i Jubany investigates the potential relationships between the different panels; in some cases, allowing cross-reading of the altar's titular saint with the Christian narrative subtending the sacraments as a whole. Frontals in Leon and Castille are the subject of Fernando Gutiérrez-Baños's contribution, "Decoraciones de altar de los siglos XII, XIII y XIV en los estados occidentales" (187-215). Presenting objects scattered in media and in time, this essay focuses on the dynamism of the genre "frontal," a word used in Gutiérrez-Baños's copious sources to refer to retables and antependia both (esp. 202-204); the result is a new and more detailed look at the shift from antependium to retable as the dominant form of altar decoration.

Moving farther from the altar itself, Xènia Granera Villa offers a look at Gothic keystones in "Iconografía y simbolismo en las claves de bóveda de la Diócesis de Tarragona" (169-185). The essay uncovers and localizes a number of engraved keystones in the altar area, among them several examples with different compositions addressed to different viewpoints; unfortunately, the text focuses on the history of their (mostly very common) iconographies at the expense of this spatial position. In contrast, a spatial approach characterizes Aintzane Erkizia Martikorena's contribution, "El sagrario en el equipamiento del altar en la corona de Castilla" (255-271), on the storage of consecrated hosts. Working from written sources and extant examples, the essay chronicles the reserved host's movements, first to locked boxes on the altar after Lateran IV, off the altar and into grated niches in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, then back to the altar within the retables of Post-Tridentine Catholicism. The sources marshalled here also enable a reconstruction of the nested and temporally layered nature of such containers.

One contribution strayed too far from the altar for this reviewer's taste: Francisco Prado-Vilar's text on "Archaeological discoveries of the Cathedral of Santiago and its medieval stone choir" (217-253). This magisterial essay, with its historiographic sweep and "new vision" of the choir enclosure in complex dialogue with the façade and liturgical performance, will doubtless be much cited and used in classrooms for years to come. It is out of place, however, in this particular volume. Julia Perratore's curatorial contribution, "Evoking the altar in the eclectic museum" (173-302), thematizes distance from the altar through a chronological survey of how curators at the Metropolitan Museum in New York have struggled with it, an insightful coda to the enterprise.

Overall, this essay collection offers several things. Most immediately perhaps, it is a survey of current work on Iberian altars and their environments, following up the work of Justin Kroesen, who is ubiquitous in the footnotes. These surveys are supplemented by the theoretical essays which collectively explore the altar as a site of transformation. The theoretical and practical components share, in the best cases, a long view of change over time, chronicling transformation in all its messiness and local particularities, as well as a nuanced questioning of visibility. Overall, however, these sides of the volume seem more juxtaposed than integrated. An editorial introduction would have helped to build links between the concrete altar decorations, which are mostly (and rightfully) discussed in terms of the Mass, and the more expansive view of the altar's role offered by the theoretical offerings.

There are some gaps in the coverage as well: the contributions focus on the main altar, a fair choice but one which should have been addressed. The inclusion of side altars, which often functioned as storage, could have enriched, but perhaps also muddled, the theoretical side of this text. More problematic is the absence of any contribution on textiles: though a glance at the very Mass of St. Giles reproduced on the cover reveals the multitude and richness of textile decoration for the altar, they are not given their own space. This is particularly disheartening in the face of new and ongoing research in textiles; as an example of both the remarkable textile decorations preserved for Iberia and their potential for study, one could point to the new publication from the Abegg Stiftung on *The Embroidered Altarpiece from El Burgo de Osma* (Riggisberger Berichte 25, 2022). Despite this important lacuna, however, the present volume offers a stimulating look at Iberian altars and their environment, and at the site of the altar in medieval thought writ large.