A figura mystica is a symbol within a text that allows for increased meditation; it is a ‘machine’ with which a reader can ‘lift’ his thoughts. So coined by Prudentius, active ca. 348-405, in his Psychomachia, a figura mystica has hidden meanings which have to be extracted and decoded by a cognitively sharp and alert reader. In his devotional text, the Liber visionum, John of Morigny alerts readers to the presence of figura mystica in his prologue, stating “in each vision a figure or mystery is always discovered.” For reasons that will be expounded upon in this study, I believe that Chartres Cathedral represents one of the figures that John promises are embedded in his text. Revealing the figure of Chartres Cathedral hinges upon cognitive devices frequently used in the medieval world. The medieval mind was constantly asked to create imaginatively even when at odds with the physiological or historical world. Thus when John presents Chartres in his prologue, free from the limitations of reality, the mind formulates a visualization with ease. However, for Chartres to function as a figure the image had to be manipulated to display specific images. Movement in John’s text provides the ultimate cognitive device to create Chartres the figure. It both prompts mental imaging and manipulates the image.


The necessity for envisioning Chartres as a figure is linked inextricably with the history of the *Liber visionum*. John of Morigny, a French Benedictine monk active ca. 1304-1323, created the *Liber visionum* with the intentions of providing a devotional text that could facilitate a rapport between the practitioner and the Virgin Mary. This relationship, the *Liber visionum* promises, will culminate in the devotee’s gaining knowledge of the seven liberal arts, receiving enhanced faculties of memory and eloquence, and ultimately possessing the ability to conjure visions.  

Although presumably benign, the *Liber visionum* extrapolates heavily from a condemned necromantic text, the *Ars Notoria*. In fact the *Liber visionum* has been interpreted as John’s attempt to create an “orthodox” version of the *Ars Notoria*, thus, resolving not only the heretical nature of the condemned *Ars Notoria* but also John’s previous involvement with the text.  

Although John attempts to absolve the *Liber visionum* of the necromantic overtones introduced into the text through its use of certain elements of the *Ars Notoria*, there was still an audience that was not thoroughly convinced of its benign intentions.

Within the community of John’s intended readers there existed a populace that, having practiced it, was very familiar with the *Ars Notoria*; their experiences, however,

---

3 This historical overview is largely recreated for the reader through the help of the scholarship of Claire Fanger and Nicholas Watson, taken from their introduction to the prologue to the *Liber Visionum*. Claire Fanger and Nicolas Watson, trans., “The Prologue to John of Morigny’s *Liber Visionum*”), 109-25.


5 The prologue to John of Morigny’s *Liber visionum* illustrates John’s experience with the *Ars Notoria* and his subsequent rejection of the necromantic text and acceptance of the *Liber visionum*, which is revealed to him by the Virgin Mary.

6 In my honors thesis, “Envisioning the Virgin: John of Morigny’s *Liber visionum* and the Memory of Chartres Cathedral,” I argue that John of Morigny attempts to create an “orthodox” *Ars Notoria* in the *Liber visionum* by employing an orthodox mediator, the Virgin Mary, who enabled the practitioners to receive ecstatic visions.
had made this constituency highly uncomfortable with its effects. John was aware of this community because he, like them, had been injured by the *Ars Notoria*’s malevolent results. John’s prologue, a narrative account of the visions that led him to create the *Liber visionum*, provides a glimpse into the tortured life of practicing the *Ars Notoria*. During one of his malefic visionary encounters with demons while practicing the *Ars Notoria*, John states, “Truly, truly, inexplicable is the figure of demons.”¹⁸ One of the intended results of practicing the *Ars Notoria* was to gain visionary aptitude, yet the *Ars Notoria* provoked demonic visions of terrifying proportions.⁹ In the prologue John directly addresses readers who may have been skeptical of or, worse, horrified by the *Ars Notoria*, hoping to put some distance between readers’ familiarity with that text and what John would propose in the *Liber visionum*:

> And therefore those of you who are and have been deceived in it [the *Ars Notoria*] and through it, bear the alien gods from your midst. Turn yourselves to the Lord God with your whole heart, and to his glorious and undefiled mother, the Virgin Mary. Ask and seek from them in the faith through the present art what you sought before, when you were deceived through that other reprobate art, outside the faith, from the devil and his minions….¹⁰

As one can see from John’s earnest plea, the similarities of the *Ars Notoria* to the *Liber visionum* would have presented a problem for those readers who had experienced the torment that the *Ars Notoria* had provoked. John’s audience was in dire need of reassurance that his text would be nothing like the *Ars Notoria*, and it was for this reason

---

⁷ They, like John, constituted what Richard Kieckhefer would call “the clerical underworld,” a group of religiously affiliated people who were well versed in magic of all sorts. Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 151-56.


that John saw fit to recount his own visionary experiences with the *Ars Notoria* in the prologue, counterbalancing those with the beatific visions which inspired the *Liber visionum*.

To establish itself as a different, innocuous entity, the *Liber visionum* sought different intercessory means; most importantly it facilitated a rapport with the Virgin Mary, a legitimate source that was lacking in the methodology of the *Ars Notoria*. Thus, in the stead of interacting with demons, which was one of the inadvertent effects of practicing the *Ars Notoria*, in the *Liber visionum* one interacts with the Virgin Mary. There are, however, problems inherent in employing the Virgin Mary as a visionary intercessor. John describes in the prologue how the devil sometimes deigns the appearance of the Virgin Mary, confusing practitioners.\(^\text{11}\) Thus, to foil the trickery of the devil, John gives readers the following advice: “Satan can never appear alone in a church or another holy place – rather the blessed Virgin will appear.”\(^\text{12}\) Following this counsel, practitioners should always check for a church in their visions, for it authenticates the experience. The church serves as a legitimizing device – it confirms the veracity of the Virgin’s relationship with John and her involvement in the creation of the *Liber visionum*; as such it functions as a symbol for veracity so that church stands for truth. Thus, the church provides the needed assurance of benevolence.

In the prologue John alerts readers to the legitimizing powers of the church, using it as a sign for the veracity of the Virgin’s appearance. Couched within John’s usage of the church is its similarly dual function. Church as symbol recalls a caveat John posits at the beginning of the prologue, “in each vision a figure or mystery is always

---

\(^{11}\) Fanger and Watson, “The Prologue to John of Morigny’s *Liber Visionum*,” 204.

\(^{12}\) Fanger and Watson, “The Prologue to John of Morigny’s *Liber Visionum*,” 204
Symbol and figure can be used interchangeably, yet as a symbol for veracity the church is a static, one-dimensional object used to elicit a reflexive response of acceptance, while as a figure, the church is open to three-dimensionality and exploration. The church as figure is indicative of many tropes, the \textit{figura mystica} being one of them, yet the medieval architecture trope provides a more precise framework for contextualizing the symbol in the prologue. Contemporary scholar Mary Carruthers coined the term, giving a name to the medieval literary device of using buildings as informative devices that invite invention and discovery. Carruthers suggests that the architecture trope derives from Corinthians 3:10-17, the passage in which St. Paul compares himself to a wise master-builder, “According, to the grace of God which is given unto me, like a wise master-builder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon.” As Carruthers notes, this gave license to various types of exegetical architectural metaphors, the most noteworthy being the twelfth-century Victorine theologian Hugh of St. Victor’s \textit{De arca Noe mystica}. In his treatise, Hugh of St. Victor creates a mental picture of Noah’s Ark using it as a memory device. One could store and retrieve information in the imagined Ark and also invent one’s own exegetical groundwork by shifting and arranging the information. In Hugh of St. Victor’s usage of

\begin{itemize}
  \item [16] Carruthers, “The Poet as Master Builder,” 890.
  \item [18] Both Daniel K. Connolly and Mary Carruthers discuss the exegetical and invention implications of Hugh of St. Victor’s work. Carruthers,“The Poet as Master Builder,” 887-88;
\end{itemize}
the architecture trope, Noah’s Ark facilitates invention and discovery by being a storehouse for remembered information. Thus, in appropriating St. Paul’s “wise master builder” trope, Noah’s Ark becomes the foundation on which one builds.

If readers are to conceive of the church as a figure that recalls the architectural metaphor, then it, as implied within this trope, must contain or allude to specific information. The church acquires content in John’s prologue by being given a name. During his visions that occurred under the auspices of the Liber visionum, John frequently names Chartres Cathedral as the setting in which his narrative unfolds. Chartres Cathedral thus provides readers with a corporeal manifestation of the architecture trope. It is a repository of Christian dogma; its information, stored visually in the cathedral’s architectural, sculptural, and painted interior and exterior, is “retrievable” with a quick glance. And yet the cathedral is also open to discovery and invention. Churches were in the medieval conscience like Mary Carruthers describes them, “heruristic, a device for ‘finding’ out meanings, rather than one that imparts knowledge.” The twelfth-century theologian Abbot Suger would have concurred. His abbey church of St. Denis could be and was, “informed by human imagination and grace,” and when it was used in such a manner it could, “lead the mind and heart by the


19 In his Spaces for the Sacred, Phillip Sheldrake elaborates on how place finds meaning in culture, so that “the meanings of places unfold in stories, myths, rituals, and in naming.” Sheldrake, Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 6.

20 See page 14 for an excerpt from John’s prologue where he introduces Chartres Cathedral.

details of the construction, to appreciate the spiritual work of the divine artificer.” Churches were anagogically equipped, their images not simply regurgitations of theological truths and biblical verses but levers that provided the mechanism which propelled viewers into contemplation. Each image was an invitation to discover and invent. Thus, Chartres Cathedral, like many Gothic cathedrals, exemplifies the architectural trope; it displays information and sets the stage for exegetical groundwork and divine revelation.

Central to the idea of the architecture trope being embodied in the figure of Chartres Cathedral is the access and retrieval of the information stored within the edifice. The architectural trope involves the usage of a physical structure, whether imagined or real, as a means to arrange and retain information; inherently implied within this trope is the ability to envision the structure as a physical manifestation of a symbolic or ephemeral essence. In his De arca Noe mystica, Hugh of St. Victor describes the Ark as a flat plane seen from above and an elevation seen from the side, making the Ark essentially a three-dimensional object. As one begins to build the Ark, one places vivid images associated with specific biblical passages on the three-dimensional background. In his explanations of how to create the Ark, Hugh of St. Victor recalls the “architectural mnemonic,” a mnemonic device most thoroughly realized in the Rhetorica ad Herennium. There, the unknown author describes a vivid architectural scheme for


24 Another term coined by Mary Carruthers in her, Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 71-79.
remembering “images.” The text suggests that to create an effective storehouse for memory one must have a “background” on to which one projects “images,” associated with the information one wishes to remember. In both conceptions the ability to recall and store information depends largely on one’s ability to effectively envision it. Thus, continuing with the present comparison, Chartres, in order to function as an embodiment of the trope, must be capable of being envisioned.

For medieval readers visualizing Chartres would have been as easy as reading the letters that spelled its name. Alcuin, the ninth-century Carolingian scholar and head of Charlemagne’s palatial school at Aachen, noted that mental imaging could be induced through reading or hearing words.²⁵ He writes in his De animae ratione:

> When he [the fashioner] may hear or remember “Rome,” immediately its essence recurs to his memory, where he has stored its image, and he recalls it from that place where he had put it away. And it is more remarkable, that with respect to the unknown things, if they come to our ears from reading or hearing something, the mind immediately fashions a figure of the unknown thing.

²⁶ Alcuin acknowledges the highly visual character of medieval cognition, conceding that the mind creates images unconsciously while trying to conceptualize ideas, places, etc. Alcuin’s observation allows modern scholars to argue that medieval cognition was facilitated through the conjuring of images.²⁷ As Alcuin states, when one hears a word like Rome or Jerusalem one instinctually formulates an image. As such, the simple mention of Chartres Cathedral should prompt a visualization within John’s text. Mental imaging is prompted by reading the name, Chartres Cathedral, and the act of visualization

²⁵ Again, I am indebted to Mary Carruther’s discussion of Alcuin’s text in her, The Craft of Thought, 118-122.


²⁷ Carruthers, The Craft of Thought, 119.
is facilitated through the cathedral’s nominal associations – the legends, miracles, and artistic representations that are associated with Chartres Cathedral. Alcuin tells his medieval audience that, “thus the human mind makes up images concerning each matter; from what it knows it fashions things unknown, having all these particulars within itself.” The image is fashioned through memory work such as the recollection of personal experiences, literary texts, and artistic representations. At this level of conceptualization, effective imagining does not depend solely on the image’s resemblance to the information said or read. An image is effective if it aids in its fashioner’s internalization of said or read information. It is a cognitive image, a tool that enables comprehension. These images are irreducibly personal – crafted from varied, individual experiences – and thus show how the medieval process of creating cognitive images was highly arbitrary. In John’s prologue however, the image conjured of Chartres Cathedral is to be specific and uniform so as to induce a standard experience of Chartres that elicits specific information.

The use of Chartres as a figure requires the medieval mind to think with images, yet the process of formulating these images, left to the discretion and fancy of medieval readers, manufactures a final product that is highly individualized. Conceptualizing Chartres as a figure that embodies the architectural trope requires that its visualization be specific and uniform. An arbitrary mental imaging of Chartres may prompt a misguided or faulty revelation or perhaps, worse of all, no revelation at all. Therefore, in order for Chartres to function as one of the figures John warns readers about in his caveat, the text

28 “Names give the landscape a particular meaning in relation to human memories. No name is arbitrary. Every name, even a single word, is a code that, once understood, unlocks a world of associations, events, people, and their stories.” Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, 16.

has to induce a visualization that is not subject to arbitrary fancy. The text must, in fact, manipulate the way in which readers bring Chartres into being imaginatively. This is done, I argue, through movement in John’s text.

In order to understand how movement could, in fact, create place, it is important to comprehend how place could be created in the Middle Ages. In his critique of the Australian aboriginal myth of creation recounted in Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane*, Jonathan Z. Smith, a contemporary scholar of religions, defines and qualifies the creation of place in myth, providing an analysis that is useful in conceptualizing movement and place in the present study.  

The aborigines, the Tjipla, conceive of their world as one brought into being by movement. In their creation story, supernatural ancestors, “moved about on the surface. Their actions and their wanderings brought into being all the physical features of the Central Australian landscape. Mountains, sandhills, swamps, plains, springs, and soakages, all arose to mark the deeds of the the roving totemic ancestors and ancestresses.” Each striking feature and landmark became associated with ancestral activity, creating a topography that was marked with traces of the sacred.

Smith understands the ancestors’ movements as memorializing place rather than creating it. The ancestors do not channel any direct energy in creating the topography. As a result, Smith finds difficulty in stating that the ancestors created the landscape, preferring to ascribe their movements to “marking” the space. The myth, as Smith interprets it, “records, permanently, the transitory act of their passing through in a

---


32 Smith 18.
manner similar to a photograph of the movement of charged particles in a cloud chamber – a solemn and important graffito, ‘Kilroy was here.’”33 In his metaphor, Smith downplays the importance of memorializing place, dismissing the significance of memorializing in creating place. As Smith asserts, place cannot be physically created through the act of memorializing, yet it is through this act that place can be given meaning – a cultural definition. The ancestors, through their movement, imbued the landscape with meaning. Their paths, the things they touched, suddenly became a way of identifying place, of adding another layer of significance, “In the scores of thousands of square miles that constitute the Aranda-speaking area there was not a single striking feature which was not associated with an episode [of ancestral activity] in one of the many sacred myths.”34 They did not “physically” create place through their movements but culturally defined it, and thus created informed place. Both creations are arguably relevant and important to this discussion.

The aborigine way of creating place through movement provides insight into how place could be created in the Middle Ages. Memorializing place performatively became a way in which place could be brought into being. The Palm Sunday Processional, carried out every liturgical year in the West, provides a salient example of how this was done. Palm Sunday commemorates Christ’s entry into Jerusalem and, accordingly, the processional attempts to recreate the historical event and locus. The liturgical act is achieved by transforming the city into a veritable Jerusalem. J. Z. Smith argues that the “importing” of Jerusalem into the West was only successful because of the, “associative

33 Stehlow, “Personal Monototemism in a Polytotemic Community,” 2:727. Cited in Smith, To Take Place, 18

dimensions of place together with the syntagmatic dimensions of narrative.”35 A city like Chartres “became” Jerusalem because of the symbolic movement through a space that, through associative topographical dimensions, resembled Jerusalem. For instance, the cemetery of Saint-Barthelemy, which lay outside the Chartrain city walls in the Middle Ages, became Golgotha, the site of Christ’s crucifixion, which was east beyond the city walls of Jerusalem.36 At “Golgotha” the Chartrain procession participants, composed of priests, monks, and laypeople, arranged themselves around the great cross in the cemetery to perform the Adoration of the Cross. The twelfth-century bishop Ivo of Chartres’ sermon commemorating the event exhorts the faithful to “allow the remembrance of the blood Christ spilled on the cross to incite them to a greater fervor.”37 Craig Wright recounts that in accordance with this theme, “a separation of the unbelievers (or malefactors) from the faithful of Chartres was now effected.”38 The miscreants dismissed themselves from the procession and the processional body, thus purified, continued up the hill and into “Jerusalem” for their glorious entry.

As illustrated by this brief look at the Chartrain Palm Sunday procession, the associative dimensions of space in concert with symbolic choreography enabled the celebrants to suspend disbelief and engage in the recreation of a historical event. The procession – the movement through space – helped to unveil, step by step, the imagined Jerusalem. Each place in the fabricated pilgrimage to Jerusalem did not come into being

35 Smith, To Take Place, 94.


38 Wright, “The Palm Sunday Procession in Medieval Chartres,” 346.
until the space was transversed. Then it was created through performative veneration, the circumambulation of the space, or completion of a ritual. It was, in fact, through the commemoration of Jerusalem that Jerusalem was created at Chartres and other dioceses in the medieval West.

In ritual ceremonies such as the Palm Sunday procession, celebrants are moved cognitively while they move physically. They are provoked by ritualized movement to envision and participate in a place that does not actually exist. Movement, although not the sole cause of this phenomenon, helps initiate the process. As J. Z. Smith so aptly put it, “It is the relationship to the human body, and our experience of it, that orients us in space, that confers meaning to place. Human beings are not placed, they bring place into being.” Bringing place into being begins with movement. It can physically carry one into space and it can shift one into another cognitive state. This is done especially when movement is ritualized, but this mental shift into the imaginative realm can also be done in less heightened circumstances.

Pilgrimage provides another way in which to conceptualize this cognitive shift. In her diary the fourth-century pilgrim, Egeria, recounts her pilgrimage to her fellow nuns. Her descriptions of her varied experiences serve as a guide for her sisters, a way for them to visit Jerusalem vicariously through her. In one of her entries she writes:

And so we were shown everything written in the holy books of Moses that was done there in that valley which lies below the mountain of God, the holy Mount Sinai. It was too much, however, to write down each one individually, because so many details could be retained; besides, when Your Charity reads all that was done there.

---

39 Smith, To Take Place, 28.

It becomes apparent in Egeria’s description that the place, Mount Sinai, provides the needed context for her to experience the Biblical verses that she had commanded to memory. While the physical sensation of being in Jerusalem enabled pilgrims to engage in recreating historical events, the pilgrims were not oblivious to the “modern” state of many places. As Carruthers states, “Many pilgrims were well aware of and yet undisturbed by the impossibility that the actual objects, such as the palm and sycamore trees had survived for so many centuries. What is authentic and real about the site is the memory work, the thinking to which they gave the clues.” What mattered to the pilgrims was, in fact, the, “Kilroy was here,” that Smith dismisses. The historicized actions imbued the place with significance and the physical remnant, whether original or not, was influential in triggering the medieval mind to remember and recreate past events. Yet, also inherent in pilgrimage is the necessity of voyage – to clearly demarcate the land where history was made. The pilgrim’s movement into the actual place of the historical event shifted her into a higher awareness. Jerome’s letters to the Roman matron, Marcella, illustrate this concisely, “Whenever we enter the Holy Sepulchre we see the lord lying in his winding sheet, and dwelling a little longer, again we see the angel at his feet, the cloth wrapped at the head.” The historical event had passed, yet upon entering the place a vivid mental image of the swaddled Christ was conjured.

It has been sufficiently argued that movement could cause place to come into being in the medieval mind. Thus, as John’s medieval audience begins to read his thema, his vision that anticipates the course of his narrative, I believe it is the mechanism of

---


movement that causes a specific and uniform image of Chartres to be conjured. John’s *thema* anticipates the course of the visionary narrative and provides a salient example of how movement prompts precise visualization of Chartres to occur. John writes:

> When I John, was about fourteen years old and lived in the city of Chartres in the close of the blessed Mary, very close to the church, about a stone’s throw away, this vision was shown to me as one born out of due time. On a certain night I was placed in a kind of ecstasy, whether in the body or out of the body I know not, God knows. And lo, I saw a certain figure, and it seemed to me absolutely certain that it was the enemy of the human race. And that figure rose up against me, wishing and craving to suffocate me. When I saw it fled I aghast in great fear from its terrible face, and it pursued me hither and thither, and could not catch me, and yet pressed upon me as it followed, so that I left the house I was in fleeing from the face of my persecutor. And when I went outside it did not cease to follow me; and when it rose up hugely I stopped in my tracks and ran towards the church of the blessed Mary. I entered it through the right hand door of the main entrance of the west front…

At the outset of the *thema*, readers encounter Chartres Cathedral in word form, which allows them to think with images, perhaps conjuring their own personalized likeness of the cathedral. However, John is most specific about his location, telling readers that he lived, “about a stone’s throw away.” This first sign of specificity enables readers to gage his movement as the narrative proceeds into less definite areas. John’s specificity wanes as he is confronted by the horrible figure and the imminence of the cathedral is momentarily displaced while an abstract space consumed by fear and anxiety floods the narrative. It is not until John mentions “the house I was in” that place slowly begins to emerge again. John’s admission returns readers back into his placement in the imaginative topography of the text and allows them to rejoin his journey. After this quick

---


44 Fanger and Watson, “The Prologue to John of Morigny’s Liber Visionum,” 170. It has been suggested that John’s proximity to the cathedral indicates that he was a child of the alb during the period when this dream occurred, their residency just twenty meters north of the transept. Fanger and Watson, “The Prologue to John of Morigny’s Liber Visionum,” 207.
concession, John circumambulates the cathedral rapidly, not disclosing his location until he reaches the western front where he enters through the right door. From John’s departure at the residency of the children of the alb to his arrival at the western front of Chartres Cathedral, he would have passed the northern transept, a fact he never mentions. However this is significant as the northern façade contains architectural images that would have affected the way in which readers experienced John’s work. If readers reconstruct John’s pilgrimage in their mind then a plethora of images are conjured that are relevant in understanding not only the present vision but the entire Liber visionum.45 Prompted by movement, there is little doubt that readers would have engaged in imaginatively reconstructing Chartres. John’s specific movements lead readers to conjure specific images, thus, enabling Chartres the figure to present specific imagery upon which one could meditate and discover hidden meanings.

This is not the end of John’s journey, but rather the beginning. Chartres as a figura mystica has the potential to add layers of interpretative dimensions to the Liber visionum. This interpretation is initiated and mediated through movement, the interaction between space/place and person.

---

45 See, “Envisioning the Virgin: John of Morigny’s Liber visionum and the Memory of Chartres Cathedral,” for a more precise understanding of the images that John’s circumambulation would have conjured.
Works Cited

**Primary Sources**


**Secondary Sources**


