Among the various forces that made Paris the principal centre of learning in twelfth-century Europe, the culture connected with the abbey of St Victor was one of the most influential. Founded in 1113 with support from the Capetian royal house and the Gregorian reform movement, the abbey became something of an epitome of the flourishing of the city. The attraction it had for the students who flocked to Paris was largely due to the reputation of Hugh of St Victor, who was in charge of the abbey school from the second decade of the century until his death in 1141.

One way of measuring the influence of this school would be by searching the writings of Hugh of St Victor for indications of the sorts of scholarly ambitions he sought to meet. The first work to go to would be his famous didactic treatise, the Didascalicon.\(^1\) In the preface, the Victorine master explains that there are two principal ways of acquiring knowledge, namely reading and meditation. He goes on to distinguish two kinds of readers: the first are engaged in the arts or sciences, while the second apply themselves to the Scriptures.\(^2\)

For present purposes I shall merely accept this basic subdivision of Hugh of St Victor’s audience and turn to the question of what the student of the arts could expect from his teaching.\(^3\) If we consult

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2 *Didascalicon, praefatio* (Buttimer 2; Taylor 44). In the following I shall use the terms ‘science’ and ‘scientific’ with reference to ‘secular’ knowledge, the field of the *lectio artium*, which is covered by the first three books of the *Didascalicon*. On the broader significance of science in Hugh and the interaction of *lectio artium* and *lectio divina*, see R. Baron, *Science et sagesse chez Hugues de Saint-Victor* (Paris 1957).


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the Didascalicon once again, it appears that the study of the arts served as lofty a purpose as any religious pursuit, namely "the restoration of the divine likeness within man". While the exposition of the arts in the Didascalicon meets this purpose in an original and convincing manner—for which I refer to Jerome Taylor’s excellent introduction to the work,—this exposition does not necessarily reflect Hugh’s teaching practice. In order to obtain a full picture one should also take Hugh’s other works into account. In the following I give some examples from these works, in order to illustrate the various roles in which Hugh cast the arts. The aim of this survey is to see how the Victorine master made his sweeping ideas about the arts work.

Hugh of St Victor left only two treatises on specific arts, namely the Practica geometriæ and the De grammatica. For the historian of science, the Practica geometriæ is of particular interest for two reasons. On the one hand, it is one of the first works to apply the traditional distinction between theoretical and practical philosophy to a specific discipline. On the other hand, it offers a useful recapitulation of medieval geometry just before the influx of Arab science. In the prologue, Hugh himself explains that he did not so much wish to create an original work as to collect the scattered opinions of earlier authors. In his edition of the Practica geometriæ, Roger Baron implies that the ultimate significance of practical geometry for Hugh consisted in its relation to moral philosophy. This suggestion is not, however, borne out by the contents of the Practica geometriæ. The work does not include any reference to ethics, but offers a purely scientific description of the three parts of geometry, that is, of altimetry, planimetry, and cosmimetry.

To illustrate Hugh’s method I quote his introduction of the right-angled triangle:

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4 See Didascalicon 2.1 (Buttimer 23; Taylor 61).
5 Taylor, The Didascalicon (as in n.1) 7-19.
6 Both works edited in: R. Baron, Hugonis de Sancto Victore Opera propaedeutica (Notre Dame 1966).
8 Practica geometriæ, prologus (Baron 15).
9 Baron, Opera propaedeutica (as in n.6) XVI.