3

The Second Remoteness of the Depth of Field

Skies in Antique and Medieval Images

Introduction

IF THE SUBJECT of the last chapter – the rocks in post-Egyptian images – referred to the first domain to be incorporated in the extended depth of field of image evolution, the theme of the present chapter – the skies in antique and medieval images – deals with the second. It is one thing to have rocks as the ground and background in images, but it is quite another to raise the pictorial gaze from the ground and up into that intangible dome which comes under the umbrella category of 'the sky'. This simultaneously volatile and unchangeable zone, the locale of fog and gathering storm clouds as well as eternally fixed star constellations, the re-emerging sun and the deep blueness of daytime, apparently requires protracted cultural assimilation before it can be visualised as a standard element of the pictorial paradigm.

Egyptian and Mesopotamian outdoor scenes thus always take place on a plain and empty background, and where Aegean landscape images occasionally have coloured backgrounds – deep red or blue – there is nothing to indicate that these refer to actual skies.[1] It is not until classical antiquity introduces an incipient perspective that the image's depth of field stretches so far out in space that a more explicit celestial surface is seen above the soil: a presence that is developed in the Middle Ages with celestial images made up of richly-coloured surfaces, stripes or patterns.

Nevertheless, in pre-modern times this celestial surface determined by the paradigm is never present to such an extent that it includes celestial bodies such as sun, moon and stars, cast light and associated shadows, let alone atmospheric phenomena such as clouds, fog, storms, lightning, wind, rain and snow. The representation of the sky would seem to be symbolic rather than actually optical. As is the case with perspective in pre-modern times: the balloon is inflated to bursting point, but it does not explode.

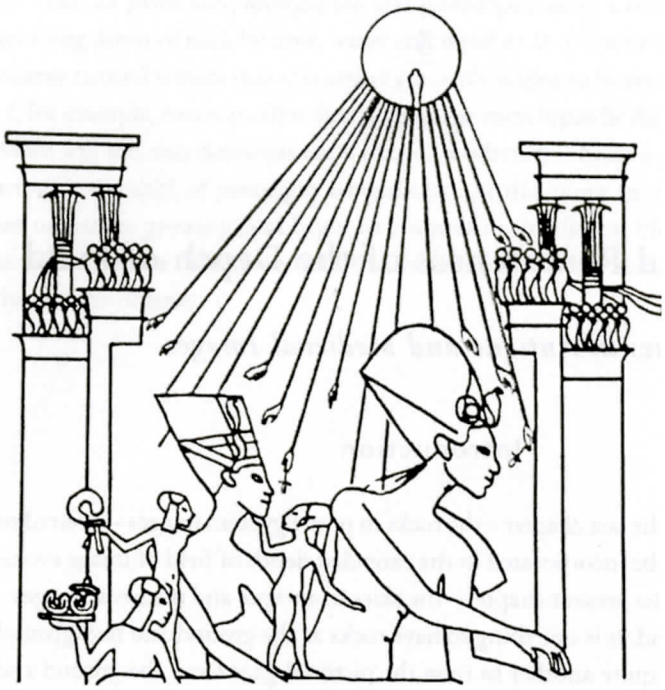

Fig. 3.1. *The Sun (Aten) Sends Its Rays out across Amenhotep IV and His Family* (18th dynasty, 1550-1307 BC), painting from the tomb of Ay, Amarna.

This should by no means suggest that more specific celestial phenomena as such are unknown in pre-modern images, simply that they are only portrayed if necessitated by the theme – in other words, when we move from the sphere of the paradigm and iconology to that of iconography. When the sun of an Egyptian tomb relief sends its rays out across Amenhotep IV and his family (18th dynasty, 1550-1307 BC), it is because the rays, via small hands, endow the pharaoh and his family with life-giving *ankh*-signs (FIG. 3.1).[2] When seven stars appear on the cave firmament in a late antique relief of Mithras sacrificing the bull, it is because they symbolise the astral aspect of the scene's seven main figures (FIG. 3.2).[3] And when a swarm of red and blue clouds is seen against the deep-blue firmament of San Prassede's apse mosaic (9th century) in Rome, it is because at the Second Coming they transport the returned Christ into the earthly domain (FIG. 15).

Nevertheless, as far as the iconography is concerned the limiting observation

Fig. 3.2. *Mithras Sacrificing the Bull* (3rd century AD), marble relief from the Esquiline Hill, near Santa Lucia in Selci. Rome, Vatican, Museo Chiaramonti.

would seem to apply that while the celestial bodies were depicted from prehistoric times, the more transient phenomena of the celestial dome – fog, weather phenomena, light refraction – first emerge in a more advanced phase of cultural evolution, principally that of classical antiquity. In spatial terms this can be explained by the celestial bodies ostensibly being conceived as corporeal, and they therefore constitute more tangible objects for the undeveloped pictorial view. Fog, weather phenomena and light refraction, on the other hand, indicate a more incorporeal and abstract pictorial space – which, ultimately, means that of modernity.

These observations can also be brought together with the evolution of consciousness and the cosmological tracks in my cultural model. The sky could thus be said to be at such a great distance from the beholding subject that it cannot be a part of the depth of field of the image until consciousness has become concrete operational, i.e. has detached itself from the natural cycle and instead identifies

with a beyond placed outside that which is physically attainable: i.e. in this very sky. In the first mature phase of this stage – classical antiquity – consciousness is, however, so continually directed at the corporeal aspect that the sky of the image appears as discreet background to plastic figures. As consciousness, meanwhile, looks to a divine infinity – the innovation of the Middle Ages – it sees itself more directly reflected in the sky of the image, or rather: this sky becomes the revelatory zone for the, in itself, unattainable infinity.

The skies of the images are thus also involved in the cosmological hierarchy, which had for so long influenced the earth formations: where the ground points downwards, towards the chthonic underworld, the sky points upwards, towards the celestial divinity. Thus it can be shown that the skies in the images refer to many sides of the pre-modern cosmology, from heaven as rainbow, heaven as a building made of precious and wonderful materials, to heaven as a canopy, the material cladding of which casts darkness just as much as it leads towards the divine light. Whatever the diversity of these metaphors, they all point towards a notion of matter as a refractory medium for the spirit, so that the spirit prospers more purely the thinner and more weightless the matter – a correlation that is represented in medieval images by colour and material metaphors. Thus the pictorial history of the sky is ultimately also a history of the distribution of light in the image, because as part of God's spirit it is neither cast nor reflected, but instead it is spread from higher to lower matter.

As, in a Hegelian sense, the antique and medieval image paradigms manifest the spirit in its most indestructible form – the former through closed human bodies, the imprint of celestial ideas; the latter through a luminous celestial surface, the revelation of a celestial infinity – it becomes apparent from a different quarter that they have only a limited capacity to represent subjects such as fog, weather phenomena and light refraction. Besides signifying an immaterial and abstract space, these subjects can all be seen as manifestations of the opposite of indestructibility: *time*. Seasons, months and the sequence of day and night regulate the meteorological phenomena, just as they determine how the light sources of the sky are dispersed across the firmament. The world hierarchy could thereby be seen as a gigantic immobiliser of time, which through its polarisation strips the image's middle distance of any trace of time, not just the loose soil (time wearing away the rock) but also weather phenomena, clouds and consistent light-shadow effects (temporal manifestation in the celestial domain).

In timelessness we have identified another significant element of the paradigm I referred to in the previous chapter, and which will be defined more explicitly in the next: the *Golden Age paradigm*. For, with their divine presence and continuous day and summer light, the skies suggest conditions reminiscent of the primordial

state: Paradise or Golden Age. In the last section of this chapter, an analysis of Carolingian miniatures, we will see how the earth formations themselves eventually reach Paradise and are transformed into clouds – a fusion of earthly and celestial that prepares the way for the non-hierarchic pictorial space of modernity.

3.1 Classical antiquity

The absence of light sources, atmosphere and time in Roman wall paintings

The absence in painting of celestial bodies – not least the sun – must in itself set certain limits as to which light effects it is possible to represent. To be sure, depth of field, by its very nature, does demand a degree of cast light. Foreshortening can be drawn with lines alone, but a sense of materiality requires light and shade. As could have been expected, *skiagraphia* (shadow drawing) was introduced at about the same time as the first experiments within *skenographia*, namely at the end of the 5th century BC when Apollodorus became "the first man to discover the art of mixing colours and chiaroscuro" (Plutarch),[4] so presumably it is not just an offshoot of stage décor but is from the very outset identical with *skenographia*.[5] As the hunting scene in Vergina demonstrates (FIG. 1.20), the technique was well-developed in the 4th century BC, and, like the geometric perspectival drawing, it reached its climax in the Roman culture.

But again, as is the case with perspective, light in the pictorial space of antiquity is more intuitive than conceptual. The individual bodies – especially the human body – might well give a formidable impression of the way in which matter reacts in rays of light, but as Plato suggested (cf. chapter 1.3), the impression becomes more diffuse as soon as we focus on the surroundings, including shadows which are usually flickering and have no relationship to a specific unified light source. In the fresco of the three dancers from Pompeii's Casa dei Vetii, for example, the shadows are cast from the two dancers on the right towards the right, whereas the shadow from the dancer on the left is cast in the opposite direction.[6] In the Roman wall paintings generally it would seem as if there is no high sun to illuminate the whole world at one and the same time, but only an imaginary miniature sun that continually changes its position.

As already noted by Spengler and Damisch, the skies in Roman images have little in the way of clouds or any kind of atmospheric effects.[7] Generally, the Roman skies appear as completely unvarying surfaces with no trace of temporal change: blue, turquoise or colourless.[8] When clouds are produced in anything even approximating

Fig. 3.3. *Odysseus in the Land of the Laestrygonians* (*c.* 50-40 BC), fresco, detail of frieze with story of Odysseus. Rome, Vatican, Musei Vaticani, Sala delle Nozze Aldobrandine.

abundance, it is only in connection with celestial revelations such as, for example, in the fresco of the *Sacrifice of Iphigenia* (FIG. 13). At the top, Artemis, mounted on a deer, emerges from a greyish misty sky in order to seize Iphigenia, who in the lower part of the fresco is being led forward to her sacrifice. Another example is found in the *Odyssey Landscapes*, in the episode where the winds of Aeolus are released when the ox-hide bag in which they are kept is inadvertently opened by Odysseus' men. Here the winds' personifications are surrounded by their own medium, a dark bank of clouds (FIG. 3.3).[9]

The airs in Aeolus' care were the demonic winds – the unpredictable and turbulent ones that brought storm – *tempestas* – in their wake. According to another tradition, these winds were born of the original dragon, Typhon, and were thus usually confined to the caves of the underworld. Often, albeit with overlapping margins, this type of wind is juxtaposed with the four gently and evenly-blowing breezes – Boreas (northern), Notos (southern), Zephyr (western) and Euros (eastern).[10] Considering the general restrained weather features in antique pictorial art – reticence of the

Fig. 3.4. *The Trojan Horse* (*c.* 50 BC), fresco from Pompeii. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale.

paradigm in contrast to iconography – we are thereby led to another hypothesis: where garments in the plastic art and painting of antiquity occasionally give the impression of being stirred by the wind (**FIGS. 13, 6.11** and **PLATE 19**), with no specific justification in the motif, we must assume that they are susceptible to the gentle winds and not to those that cause storms.

Apart from the clouds determined by theme, the closest we get to atmospheric effects in Roman wall paintings are the light strips which occasionally appear above horizons and break up the sky-blue. In two or three places in the *Odyssey Landscapes* (the *Land of the Laestrygonians, Odysseus' Escape, Circe's Palace* (?)) this strip has a reddish tone; in the *Marine Animal Mosaic* from Pompeii's Casa del Fauno (**PLATE 20**) it is brownish and, what is more, accompanied by several similar, albeit thinner, bands in the sky itself. These strips are without doubt derived from optical impressions of the atmosphere, and yet they do not lead to the landscape being marked by traces of time. The reddish strip, for example, is used so generally that it can scarcely refer directly to sunrise or sunset. Rather, here it might indicate a more overarching accord between the beginning and end of the day and the general whitening of midday.

Nocturnal scenes are also evidently a rarity in classical Roman painting. In one of the few I have come across – *The Trojan Horse* from Pompeii (**FIG. 3.4**)[11] – there is

a sense of the strangeness of the theme. Even though the figures are boldly drawn in bright white light creating an illusion of moonlight, and burning torches are held at arm's length to provide further illumination, there is no real evocation of a sense of darkness. The range of colours is only muted as far as brown-grey tones, the sky is light grey and devoid of stars, and the torches cast no visible glow.

In return for this absence of clouds and time, it is as if the entire Roman pictorial space has been immersed in a mild mist, which tones down the middle distance and turns the slightly more distant objects – architecture, trees, rocks – into simple silhouettes. The mist, however, is not painted in a clear-cut manner as in a 17th-century Dutch painting, but almost seems to be built into the nonchalant, fluid brush technique – the so-called *ars compendiaria* – which imbues the Roman images with a dreamlike, unreal quality.[12] Not unlike Plato's objections, they appear more like visions, apparitions, rather than reconstructions of an underlying reality.

Classical concepts of light

Pictorial art is not alone in lacking a consistent cast light: antiquity as a whole had no concept of it. As was also the case with the homogeneous space, the atomists probably came closest. Thinking in atoms and voids, they reasoned that all objects emitted film-like images constructed of atoms, and that visual impressions occurred when these images struck the eye. In accordance with the evidence of the images, the air exerted resistance so that "all things that we see at a great distance through much air become dimmed in appearance before their size is diminished."[13] The way in which light affected the dissemination of the images remained, however, unclear.

The rival theories, developed in Athens by Plato and Aristotle, faced the problem that light was irretrievably bound to the heavens and their offshoots in fire, air and soul. Light was not just a mechanical capacity; it was a spiritual force to do with clear-sightedness: with insight into the celestial ideas. Projected light and its shadows, on the other hand, suggested random visual impression. Even though Plato adhered to this model and distinguished between the immaterial light in the beyond and its weaker earthly imprint, sunlight was still, however, to the domain of the visible what the good was to the domain of the intelligible.[14] According to Plato, sight came about when visual rays of refined soul-fire met the sunlit air and the more or less luminous object. If, in harmony, the light rays of the object and the air were more powerful than those of the eye, then the object's colour became whitish; if they were weaker, then it became darker.[15] For the Athenians, air was thus not an impediment, but rather a prerequisite for clarity.

Even though the atomists' theory of emitted images is able to supply theoretical evidence for the intuitive air perspective of the wall paintings, atomists and

Athenians alike become shy when it comes to an optical explanation of the dissemination of light. In Plato the visible sunlight might indeed be allotted a certain impact, but in other respects he relies on light as a spiritual force that is reproduced downwards through the world hierarchy. This hesitancy to analyse the optical effect of light could therefore be seen as structurally equivalent to the flickering projected light of antique painting.

Classical concepts of clouds

The failure of clouds to gain entry to the antique pictorial space is presumably not only connected with the restricted field of pictorial vision and the corresponding absence of time, but also with the circumstance that they still partly belong to the sacred domain of the celestial bodies. It is only when a deity appears on the heavens that clouds are imbued with sufficient dignity to be shown.

The connection to the sacred heavens is corroborated by the clouds being full of rain, storm, thunder and lightning. The agricultural cycle is controlled by these functions of the weather, and in the Middle East, Asia Minor and Greece the gods of the heavens and of the weather were identical.[16] In early Greek literature, Zeus goes by names such as the one who is "cloud gathering", the one "who drives the clouds", "the Olympian Lightener" and the "loud-thunderer" and it is said of him that he "sits on high and dwells in the aether" and that he holds "the lightning and glowing thunderbolt".[17]

As culture moves towards a more patriarchal world picture, in which the heavens are considered incorruptible and superior to the earth's cycles, clouds meanwhile find themselves in a charged intermediate zone: are they still part of the divine heavens or do they, on the contrary, shade the ether? As early as in the writings of Homer (8th-7th century BC), Olympus, the home of the gods, has no storms, rain, snow or clouds and the air is clear and radiant.[18] And in Aristophanes' (*c.* 450-385 BC) comedy *Clouds*, Socrates is made fun of because he allegedly attributes the clouds divine properties. Socrates himself exclaims:

> O Lord and Master, measureless Air, who hold the earth aloft, and you, shining Empyrean, and ye Clouds, awesome goddesses of thunder and lightning, arise, appear aloft, o Mistresses, to the thinker!

But when he asks his sceptical friend Strepsiades if he has never known or imagined that clouds were divine, the reply is simply: "I'd no idea; I thought they were mist and dew and smoke."[19]

A widespread religious concept that addresses both properties of clouds – the original divine and the later material – sees them as a medium of revelation for the divine: a manifestation in which the supernatural is cloaked in natural material. When God appears to Moses on Mount Sinai, the encounter takes place in a thick cloud slashed by lightning and thunder – the so-called *doxa* in the Septuagint – and it is emphasised that Mount Sinai was "wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire." Later, the cloud with God's glory is described as "like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain".[20] An identical image of the heavens thrives in classical antiquity, for when Juno in the *Aeneid* seeks out Aeneas' army, "she darted at once from high heaven through the air, driving her storm chariot and girdled in cloud".[21] The reverse movement is seen in Ovid's description of Hercules' apotheosis, when the de-materialised hero ascends into the heavens on Jupiter's chariot "through the hollow clouds".[22] The same mode of transport is used for Christ's ascension (Acts of the Apostles 1: 9): "And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight."

The distinction between spirit and matter is, however, not absolute because the clouds act as an ambiguous transitional medium, where the pure ether changes into earthly fire, which is further distilled into air, vapour, fog and smoke. In Hesiod the spirits are often clad in clouds and fog, and the home of fog par excellence is Tartarus, which demonstrates the indistinct boundaries between ether and the lowest regions of the earth.[23] Etymologically, this continuity finds expression in the term *nimbus*, which originally means dark rain cloud, storm or torrential rain (from *nubis* (=cloud) + *imber* (=rain)), but which was later applied to something that could be seen as the exact opposite: the glowing halo that encircles the deities, especially their heads.[24] As Servius writes in his commentary (*c.* 400 AD) on Virgil's "nimbo effulgens" in the *Aeneid*: "shining rain cloud: divine cloud; for it is the divine light which surrounds the heads of the gods; such is it normally painted too."[25] The nimbus is thus a thunder cloud that has, as it were, progressed from cloak of the weather god to medium of revelation for the now ether-bound god – a medium that is further distilled around the head, the seat of consciousness.

The concept of the nature of clouds follows the same principles when we move from the cult to Greco-Roman meteorology. Meteorology concerns everything between the earth and the pure quintessence of celestial bodies, i.e. from the sea at the bottom up to – especially – phenomena in the air, with fire at the top. From the Ionic philosophers via the Peripatetics and on to the atomists, we encounter the same idea: the nature of clouds is found midway between air and water, and therefore they are either formed by condensation of the former or evaporation from the latter – possibly mixed with hot exhalation from the earth.[26] Lucretius, for example, states that clouds are made of a substance midway between stone

and fog.[27] As regards lightning and thunder, their manner of formation resembles that of earthquakes: finer substances than the actual cloud mass – winds or fire – are trapped by this cloud mass and then escape by slashing open their prison. Aristotle and the later atomists insisted that lightning was produced exclusively by hot exhalations from the earth. Pliny, however, is more open-handed when attributing cause:

> [...] it is also possible for the fires of stars to fall from above into the clouds [...]; and [...] when they reach the cloud, a hissing steam is produced, just as when red-hot iron is plunged into water, and a coil of smoke whirls up. And I agree that these produce storms, and if there is wind or steam struggling in the cloud, it gives out claps of thunder, if it bursts out on fire, flashes of lightning, if it forces its way on a longer track, heat-lightning. [...] It is also possible for breath emerging from the earth, when pressed down by the counter-impact of the stars, to be checked by a cloud and so cause thunder, nature choking down the sound while the struggle goes on but the crash sounding when the breath bursts out, as when a skin is stretched by being blown into. It is also possible for this breath, whatever it is, to be set on fire by the friction during its headlong progress.[28]

What is thus being suggested by these extracts from the classical and Judaic written tradition is that clouds are inserted in a charged field between heavens and earth, spirit and matter. In this charged field emphasis is placed on their function as the medium of revelation for a higher reality – of the spirit and the ether – whereas their earlier, cyclically-determined weather function now seems to be inconspicuous.

It would thereby seem justifiable to register this view of the clouds in the same epistemic *field* as that which influences the skies of the images. For, as we also see here, the clouds are only brought in as a medium for the revelation of gods, just as they eschew weather and time. Even though the Aeolus clouds in the *Odyssey Landscapes* are dark and sombre, there is no sense that they could break out in seasonal rain, snow or hail. The clouds would seem to be locked in their role as the lowest part of the heavens' hierarchy.

The aforementioned strips that occasionally break through above horizons in the skies of Roman wall paintings are, therefore, equally indicative of this hierarchy as of the optical perception which sees the heavens growing brighter towards the horizon. The assumption is borne out by the Pompeian *Marine Animal Mosaic* (PLATE 20), in which the entire sky alternates between light-brown and blue strips as if echoing the stratification of the world hierarchy. A related effect is found in scenes of divine revelation where the very transition from earth to heavens seems to be fluid, as if the clouds have become a link between the lower and the upper.

The abovementioned *Sacrifice of Iphigenia* (FIG. 13) shows greyish cloud cover above a brownish-yellow plane filling two-thirds of the height of the fresco. While this plane, seen from above, would seem to extend the celestial zone, when seen from below it acts as an extension of the ground: a greyish belt at the bottom of the image has been painted over the brownish-yellow colour. In brief, the brownish-yellow surface constitutes a mediating link between heavens and earth.

3.2 Late antiquity and the Middle Ages

Colours, bands, patterns: the sky in medieval images

The look of the background in *Sacrifice of Iphigenia* could in part be explained by the celestial zone requiring disclosure via the revelation theme. What distinguishes the skies in medieval images from their predecessors in antiquity is that the upper section of the revelation – the divine heavens – becomes, as it were, a permanent fixture. And, hereby, everything we have so far observed in this study becomes of key significance.

Many medieval heavens are thus characterised by beautiful colours and patterns. They might, especially after the High Middle Ages, be *monochrome*: golden, deep blue, purple (FIGS. 12, 2.4 and 2.105); they might, in the Western Late Middle Ages, be covered in *patterns of plants or squares* (FIG. 10.18); or they might, especially during the last centuries before the year 1000, be divided into *coloured bands*: rose, deep blue, white, yellowish, golden or even cloud-like. In the Vatican's late-4th century Virgil manuscript, the whole background, much like that of *Sacrifice of Iphigenia*, is divided into this kind of strip, subtly gliding into each other (FIG. 3.5). The same effect, but with a slightly sharper differentiation of bands, is seen 600 years later in the *Pericope Book of Heinrich II* (FIG. 14). What purpose do these colours serve? How far is the celestial zone, for example, meant to be stretched in the striped background? Does it run imperceptibly into the earth zone, or does it cover the whole background? As is the case with the post-Egyptian rocky grounds, we can search the art historical literature in vain for an adequate explanation of the significance of the colours – not least of the bands – in medieval pictorial skies.[29]

As I shall endeavour to show, all these colours and patterns are conceptually based. The theoretical goods are again related to the cosmological world picture: to the celestial non-created light, and to this light's transmission through the created world hierarchy – from the divine source via the celestial sphere, fire and air to the clouds and, at the bottom, the earth. The prerequisite is an intensified tension between the material and the spiritual. In Christianity, God has become

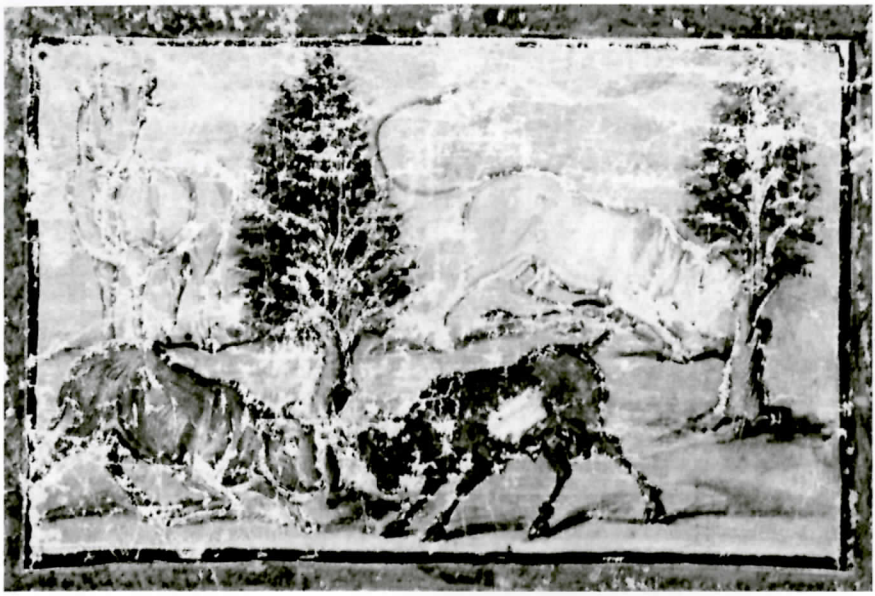

Fig. 3.5. *Landscape with Animals* (late 4th century AD), miniature from the *Vergilius Vaticanus* manuscript. Rome, Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ms Vat. lat. 3225, f. 5v.

completely transcendental: an infinity raised above even the quintessence of the celestial bodies, whereas all the regions of the heavens – including the ether and the created light second from the top – become related to the earthly sphere. The consequence of this as regards the pictorial space is, as mentioned earlier, that perspectival depth effects are drained off, as it were, to their source, the infinity beyond, and thus the essentially expanding sequence from foreground to sky is squeezed telescopically together: the sky is transformed into a shielding backdrop to an ultra-narrow foreground.

This development amounts to an intensification of a proposition that had already been submitted in a mature form by Plato. In the *Republic*, life on earth is compared, as we saw, with the existence of prisoners in a subterranean cave, whereby all sensory experience becomes unreal: shadows on the cave wall, cast by the celestial ideas. And in *Phaedo*, Socrates stresses the distance from our 'subterranean' heavens to the actual heavens: "and we call the air heaven, as though it were the heaven through which the stars move."[30] This line of thought is further developed in Christianity via Neoplatonism; for example, when Augustine (354-430) fixes the locations of the good and the fallen angels: "one dwells in the heaven of

heavens, the other cast down from thence, lives amidst riot and disorder in this lowest heaven of ours, a heaven of air; one is calm in the brightness of piety, the other is a seething mass of dark passions [...]."[31]

However, although the timelessness of the landscape images continues to be supported by this intensely polarised cosmology, the medieval landscapes also incorporate small iconographically-determined pockets of time. In these pockets, the germ of modernity, we encounter nocturnal darkness, seasonal variations and weather. As, however, the time pockets are best understood in relation to the changes within another domain, that of work, I will discuss them in chapter 7, and here focus on the seemingly most conservative tendencies. As we will soon see, even these tendencies are expectant with modernity.

Celestial architecture

Whether they are monochrome, striped or patterned, the painted celestial phenomena – both the iconographic and the paradigmatic – are executed in precious materials such as gold and lapis lazuli, or radiant colours which suggest such materials.[32] The background for this is, to a large extent, tangibly cosmological, as since pre-classical times it was thought that the celestial dome must be made from the world's most magnificent and indestructible materials. We can already see from the Babylonian world building that the heavens were divided into three strata: at the top, the so-called *luludanîtu* stone; in the middle, the *saggilmut* stone where "the lord", presumably Marduk, sat in state in his cell of glazed brick; and, at the bottom, the visible firmament of blue jasper.[33] Precious stones seemed an obvious celestial material as they were indestructible and transparent, and sparkled in pure colours suggestive of stars. Their celestial identity was also substantiated by meteorites, which fell from the heavens in luminous stripes (shooting stars).[34]

The concept perseveres in Judaic culture, for in the account of the Creation (Genesis 1: 6) God divides the celestial waters from the earthly waters by making a firmament in their midst, the so-called "expanse". Job (37: 18) interprets this celestial firmament in metallic terms: "Can you, like him, spread out the skies, hard as a cast metal mirror?" In Ezekiel's version (1: 22) the firmament would seem to be more crystalline: "Over the heads of the living creatures there was the likeness of an expanse, shining like awe-inspiring crystal, spread out above their heads." The same association is found in the Book of Revelation (4: 6): "[...] and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal"; furthermore (15: 2): "And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire."

Regardless of the specific interpretations – precious stones, metal, mirrors, glass, crystal, ice, fire – the celestial architecture is thus linked with precious and

Plate 1.

Horses and Handprints (*c.* 15,000 BC),

cave painting. Pech-Merle.

Plate 2.

Caspar David Friedrich,

Wanderer above the Mists (*c.* 1818),

oil on canvas.

Hamburg, Kunsthalle.

Plate 3.

Nativity (*c.* 1350), fresco.

Peleponnes, Mistra,

Church of the Peribleptos.

Plate 4.

Anonymous northern Italian artist

(from Ferrara?),

Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata

(1480s), tempera on wood.

Pesaro, Museo Civico.

Plate 5.

Garden (*c.* 20 BC), fresco,

from the House of Livia at Primaporta.

Rome, Palazzo Massimo alle Terme.

Plate 6.

Gentile da Fabriano,

Flight into Egypt (1423),

predella from the *Strozzi Altarpiece*,

tempera on wood.

Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi.

Plate 7.

Robert Campin, *Nativity* (*c.* 1425),
tempera on wood.
Dijon, Musée des Beaux-Arts.
Photograph © Musée des
Beaux-Arts de Dijon.

Plate 8.

Francesco del Cossa,

Saint John the Baptist (*c.* 1473-75),

tempera on wood,

right panel of the *Griffoni Polyptych*.

Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera.


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Plate 9.

Forger, Wild animal mosaic

in Roman style

(second half of the 18th century (?)).

Rome, Musei Vaticani,

Sala delle Nozze Aldobrandini.

Plate 10.

Piero della Francesca,

Resurrection (1450s (?)), fresco.

Sansepolcro, Pinacoteca di Sansepolcro.

Plate II.

Niccolò di Pietro Gerini,

Resurrection (*c.* 1371), fresco.

Florence, Santa Croce, sacristy.

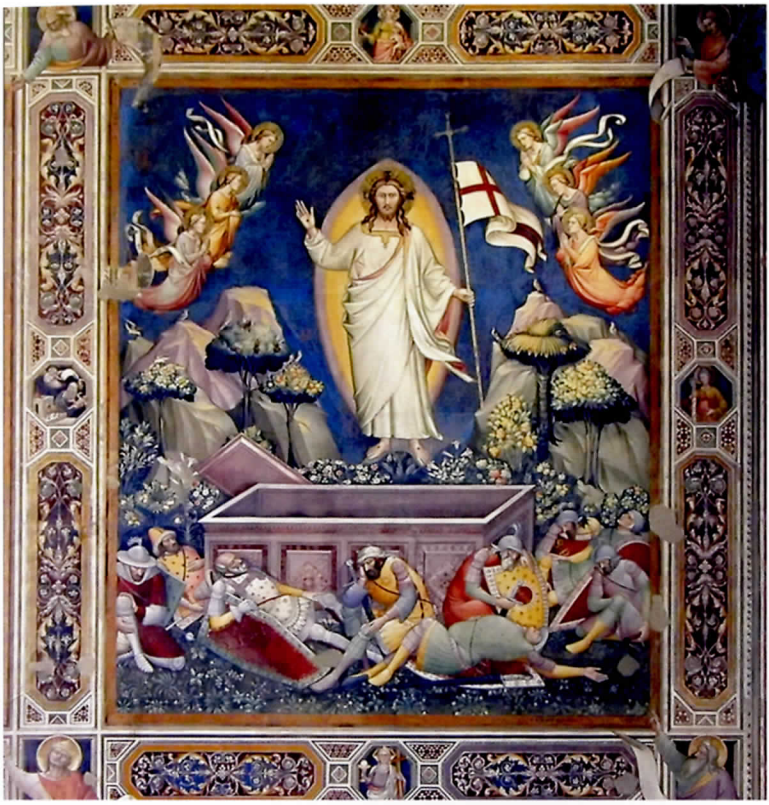

Plate 12.

Map of Anxur-Tarracina
(modern Terracina)
colony with Via Appia,
centuriation, Pomptine marshes
(PALVDES) and mountains (9th century),
miniature from manuscript of Hyginus
Gromaticus' *Constitutio limitum*
(early 2nd century AD).
Rome, Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica
Vaticana, ms Pal. lat. 1564.

Quibusdam coloniis .d. o. ita constituerunt ut uiam consularem transeuntem per coloniam contineat. sicut incampania coloniae axurnas .d. o. per uiam appiam obseruatur. fines qui culturam accipere potuerunt & limites acceperunt. reliqua pars asperis rupibus continetur. terminata inextremitate more arcifinio per demonstrationes & locorum uocabula.

Quibusdam coloniis postea constitutis sicut inafrica ad medere .d. o. & k. exhis acilitate oritur & per quattuor portas immore castrorum uiae amplissimis limitibus diriguntur. haec est constituendorum limitum ratio pulcherrima. nam colonia omnis quattuor partes regiones continet. & est colentibus uicina undique incolis quoq. iter adforum ex omniparte aequale sic & incastris groma ponitur. inter rantem qua uelut adforum conuentur.

Plate 13.

Ambrogio Lorenzetti,

Effects of Good Government

in the Countryside (1337-40),

fresco (section).

Siena, Palazzo Pubblico,

Sala della Pace.

Plate 14.

Satyric Cave with Fountain

(*c.* 50-40 BC), fresco (section)

from a cubiculum in the Villa

of P. Fannius Synistor, Boscoreale.

New York, The Metropolitan Museum

of Art, Rogers Fund, 1920 (20.192.17).

Plate 15.

Giovanni di Paolo,

Creation of the World and the

Expulsion from Paradise (*c.* 1445),

tempera and gold on wood. New York,

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,

Robert Lehman Collection, 1975 (1975.1.31).

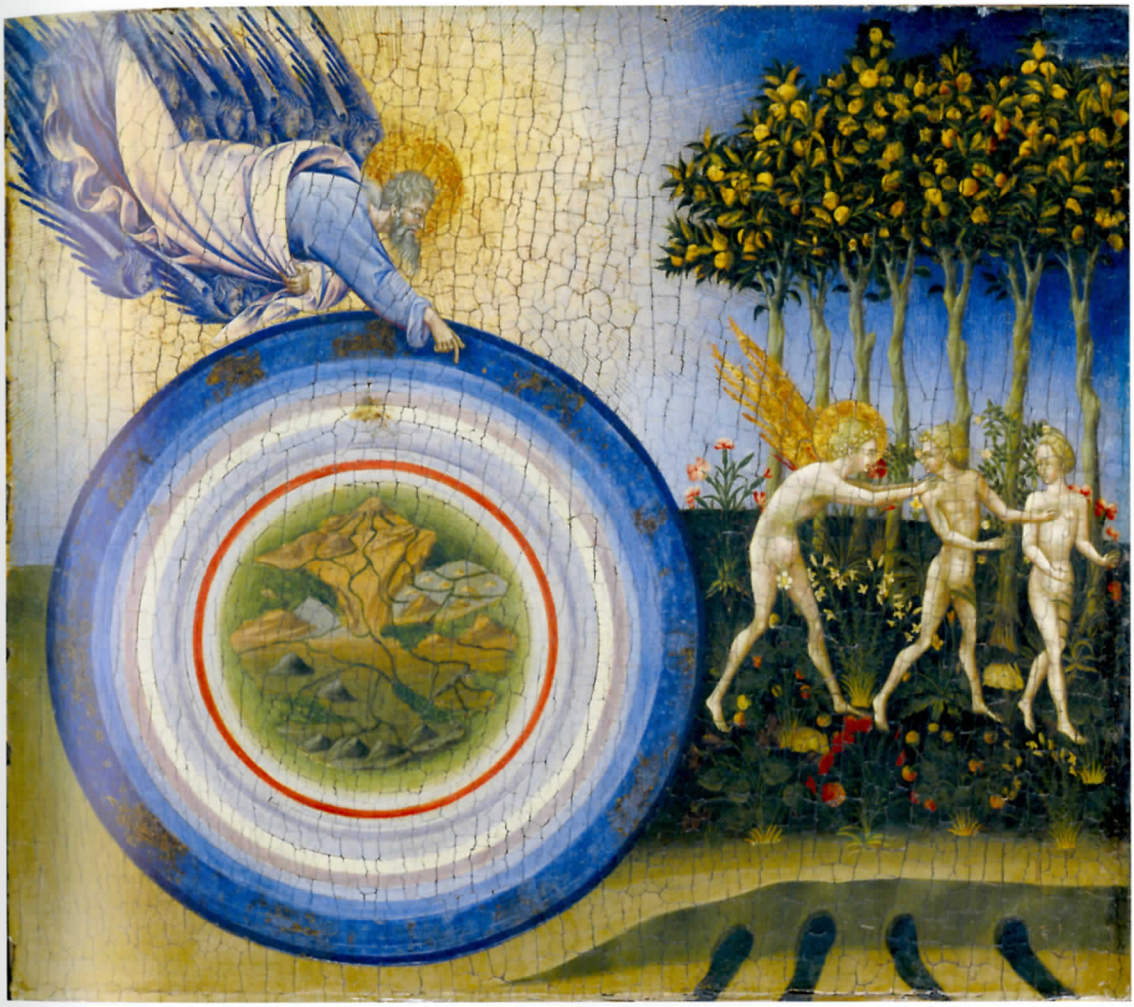

Plate 16.

Creation of Sea and Earth

(*c.* 1185-*c.* 1191), mosaic.

Monreale, Cathedral.


GGET·AQ·Q·SVB·CELO·SC
OCV·VNV·ZAPPAVEAT·AIDA
CRA·
MARE·

Plate 17.

Adoration of the Lamb (*c.* 870),
miniature from the
Codex Aureus of Saint Emmeram,
from the Court School of Charles the
Bald, executed in Regensburg. Munich,
Bayerische Staatsbibliothek,
ms Clm. 14000, f. 6.

Plate 18.

Baptism of Christ (*c.* 975-80),
miniature from the
Benedictional of Saint Aethelwold.
London, British Library,
Add. ms 49598, f. 25.

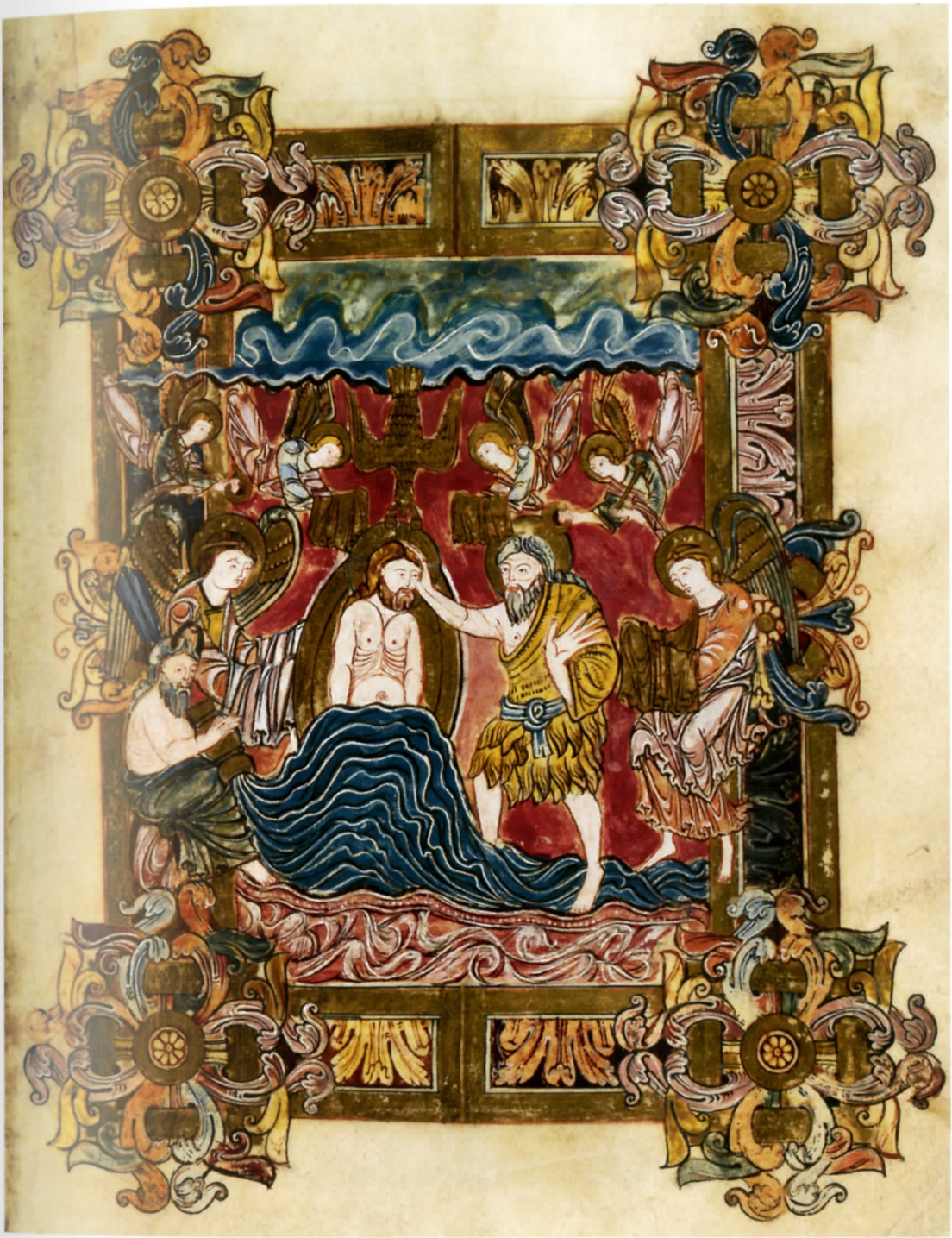

Plate 19.

Polyphemus and Galatea

(shortly after 11 BC),

fresco from villa at Boscotrecase.

New York, The Metropolitan Museum

of Art, Robert Lehman Collection, 1903

(03.14.13a-g). Photograph © 1986

The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Plate 20.

Marine Animal Mosaic (*c.* 40 BC),

from Pompeii, Casa del Fauno.

Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale.

Plate 21.

Scenes from Genesis (*c.* 835),
miniature from the *Grandval Bible*
executed in Tours. London,
British Library,
Add. ms 10546, f. 5v.

Plate 22.

The Four Evange

(early 9th centu

miniature in the *Aach*

Aachen, Cathedral T

lists

ry),

n Gospels.

reasury.

Plate 23.

Stories of Cain and Abel (7th century),
miniature in the *Ashburnham Pentateuch*,
possibly from North Africa. Paris,
Bibliothèque Nationale de France,
ms nouv. acq. lat. 2334, f. 6.

Plate 24.

Christ as the Good Shepherd

(*c.* 450-500), mosaic.

Ravenna, Mausoleum of Galla Placidia.

Plate 25.

Aion in the Zodiac,

with Mother Earth and the Four Seasons

(3rd century AD), floor mosaic.

Munich, Staatliche Antikensammlungen

und Glyptothek München.

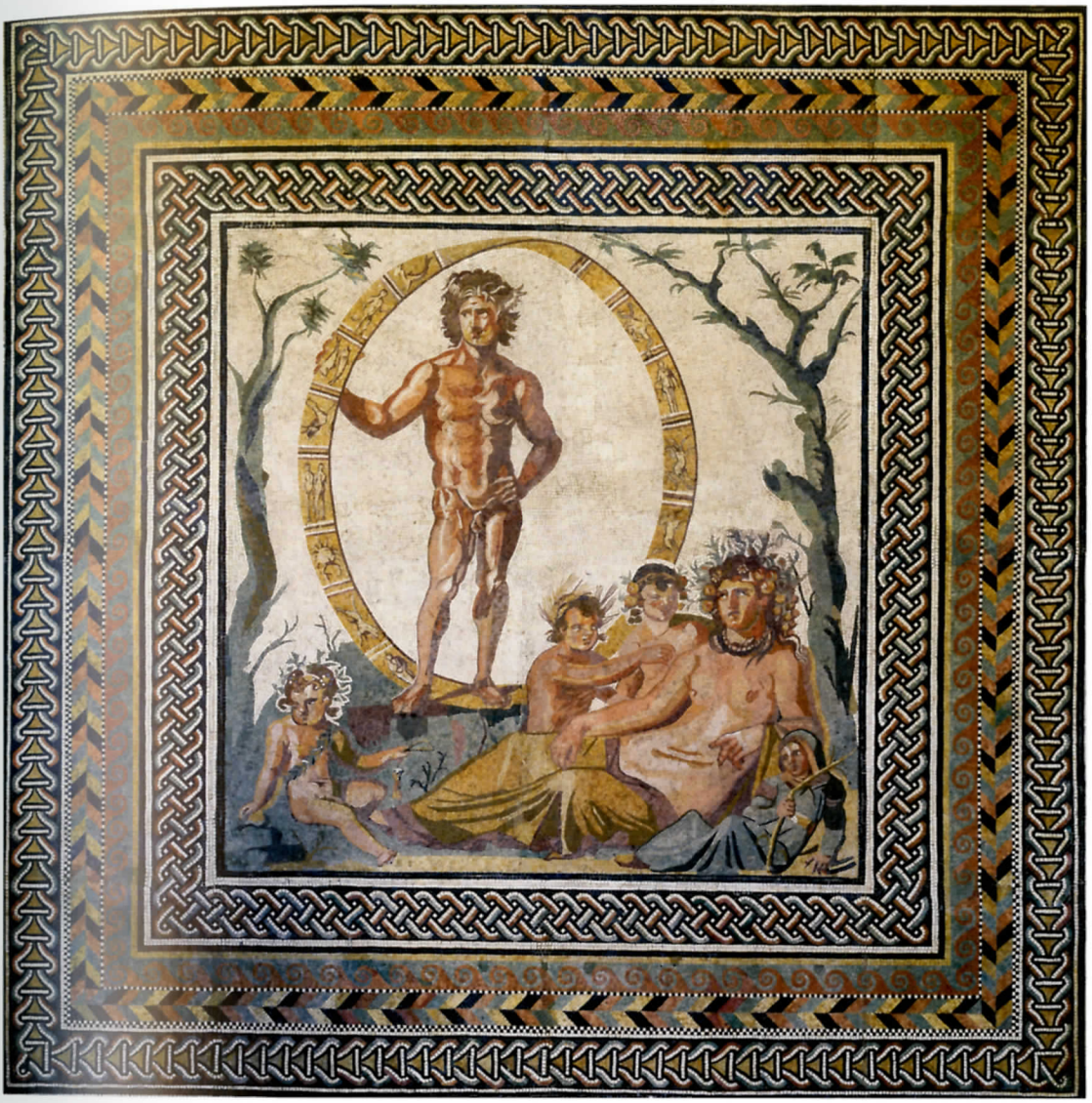

Plate 26.

Dominus Julius Mosaic

(late 4th century),

floor mosaic from Carthage.

Tunis, Musée du Bardo.

Plate 27.

Dido and Aeneas in the Cave (*c.* 450),
miniature from the *Vergilius Romanus*
manuscript. Rome, Vatican,
Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana,
ms Vat. lat. 3867, f. 77.

bright materials, and this is so because shining and translucent phenomena were generally considered to be a manifestation of *light*. As Aristotle states: "Light is then in a sense the colour of the transparent, owing to fire or any such agency as the upper firmament [...]."[35] The most precious of all was the uncoloured, pure light, but beautiful, transparent colours got close to the divine source. As the Aristotelian Meister Dietrich von Freiburg stated in 1304: "What light is in the domain of the transparent, so is colour where transparency is limited."[36]

The Middle Ages, to an even greater extent than antiquity, concentrates on *emanation* of light. Light is not projected, it is spread gradually from its uppermost source: the spirit of God. That it is dimmed during its journey down through the world hierarchy is because it encounters increasingly dense forms of matter. Lower stages of emanation therefore occur in the shadow of higher stages. A body that appears luminous does not do so because its surface reflects rays of light coming from outside, but rather because it is infused with light, and thus itself becomes a luminous body that can effect the more muted objects in the hierarchy. This interpretation is structurally equivalent to the total lack of any shadows cast in medieval painting – a phenomenon that, despite reticence and flickering, was an option in antiquity. In the Middle Ages, the bodies simply shine with a higher or lower intensity than the heavens.[37] The transformation of antique shadows into ornamental signs and their subsequent disintegration begins, characteristically, in late antiquity at the same time as spatial deconstruction (**FIGS. 1.44** and **7.21**). What is left of antique light/shadow depiction is now seen as shadows within the individual bodies, albeit these shadows are often purely ornamental.

These ideas of the celestial edifice as constructed of precious, radiant materials and the notion of light emanating in various degrees of dimness as it travels down through its spheres, can be seen as clearly isomorphic with the brightly-coloured skies which fill the backgrounds in medieval painting. Even though the colours used are indeed precious and beguile the beholder through their tangible sense perceptions, they should still be read symbolically – as weaker earthly imprints of a celestial sumptuousness that will never find its match in earthly materials. At the top of the medieval colour hierarchy we find gold which, as the most precious earthly material, outdistances all other colours – including transparent glass or white, which might otherwise be said to have a more direct similarity to undimmed light.[38] The gold ground, which is already in evidence in 5th-century art (for example, Santa Maria Maggiore's mosaics, Rome), symbolises the sovereignty of the spirit over more prosaic light sources. In Spengler's words, it stands "beyond and outside all nature-colours. Gold is not at all a colour."[39] Thereby, it could be aptly linked with the celestial light in the Book of Revelation (21: 23), in which it is said of the New Jerusalem: "And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the

glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb." However, the gold ground should not be seen as a direct reproduction of this light, for as it says in Habbakuk (3: 3-4): "His splendor covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. His brightness was like the light; rays flashed from his hand; and there he veiled his power." This passage conjures up a form of divine celestial eclipse in which God's glory illuminates the earth at the same time as it shades the actual, spiritual source: a phenomenon designated by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite "the divine darkness" (*c.* 500):

> The divine darkness is the inaccessible light in which, according to Scripture, God dwells. And although it is invisible because of its overwhelming light and inaccessible because of the repleteness of its light-pouring, it is reached by anyone who is judged worthy to see and understand God, reaching that which is above all seeing and understanding through not-seeing and not-understanding.[40]

The gold ground, which, depending on the vantage point, shimmers from the brightest to the darkest, is therefore an appropriate symbol for this divine darkness, which grows brighter the more the believer is overcome by God's spirit. The move towards this form of celestial illumination has its roots in late antiquity, when *Sol Invictus* – an important divinity in Oriental-influenced Hellenistic and Roman mystery cults – is transformed into *Sol Justitiae* and *Sol Verus*. In Malachi (4: 2) we read: "but for you who fear my name, the sun of the righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings." And Origen (185-254) stresses that Christ is the True Sun, but that "this has nothing in common with this [visible] sun's light."[41]

That the gold ground – as one block or in single bands – is the most obvious vehicle for this symbolism, does not mean that it is the only option. Every monochrome or mono-patterned heavens – purple, red, azure or marked by Gothic star and flower patterns – can be symbolic of the celestial light, which both shades and affords access to the spirit.[42] This is especially the case with *lapis lazuli* blue, a material that was almost as precious as gold and which was therefore often used for the skies in frescoes, a painting technique in which gold cannot be fixed. This azure blue is thus often claimed to belong to the highest echelons of the firmament: when, according to Ezekiel (1: 26-28), Christ is seen upon a throne which has an "appearance like sapphire" – this being the same as lapis lazuli – this sapphire is "above the expanse", i.e. the firmament. In particular, under the feet of the Lord on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24: 10), i.e. just beneath the ultimate reality, there was "as it were a pavement of sapphire stone".[43] In the work of writers such as the Venerable Bede, a related colour tone – violet-blue (*hyacinthus*) – can therefore be equated with divine glory.[44]

Nonetheless, there is a large degree of ambiguity attached to the deep-blue tones as they also provide the colour for the lowest part of the heavens, the visible firmament. When Christ is enthroned on something of an "appearance like sapphire" it is the same sapphire which, according to the Carolingian Sedulius Scotus' poem on the rainbow, "spreads its beauty to the stars", i.e. to the lower regions of the celestial rainbow (more on this shortly).[45] And Bruno of Segni (d. 1123) writes that violet-blue is the colour of the heavens, because it is also that of the air[46] – the same air, that is, that Augustine designated the domain of the fallen angels, "a seething mass of dark passions". In order to understand this paradox, we have to recognise the indistinct boundaries between the visible firmament and the divine heavens and also that even the most precious of celestial colours – gold and blue alike – were of symbolic character only.

Moreover, it must be stressed that the overall symbolism of the colour of medieval pictorial skies is characterised by considerable uncertainty. Even in emblematic images of the heavens such as the *Adoration of the Lamb* in the *Soissons Gospels* (early 9th century), we might encounter a sequence in which the sea of glass is deep blue while the celestial sphere progresses from white through to dark red.[47] And in the *Majestas Domini* in the *Vivian Bible* (Tours, 845-46), the figure-of-eight shaped mandorla spans the colours red, grey, gold and, innermost, purple, while the celestial globe is grey encircled by gold.[48] Medieval colour symbolism would thus not seem to be unequivocal and definitive, but rather to follow certain rules that are always disposed to variation.[49] It is as if the very idea of a logical reading of colours goes against the medieval understanding of God's incomprehensibility. Small unpredictable shifts will usually point out that colour is an earthly phenomenon and as such an imperfect signifier for the divine.

This ambiguity is acute when we come to the striped heavens without gold, as there is manifestly no colour – apart from gold – with such a well-defined symbolic content that it is unequivocally superior to other colours. Are the light-blue celestial stripes in the background of the *Lothar Gospels* portrait of Saint John the Evangelist (Tours, 849-51), for example, actually air blue rather than celestial blue and, if so, is this air blue above or below the rest of the pink and purple stripes?[50] And should these stripes then be linked to the spheres of fire and ether: the red domain of cherubim as opposed to the seraphs' air blue? As the reader will note, this kind of question often goes round in circles.

I will therefore cautiously restrict myself to singling out the following background stripes, which are to some extent a regular feature. The one, pink (*roseus*), possibly alludes to dawn (*aurora*) and thereby Christ's dual nature.[51] The other, light green, might, as we will soon see, be the celestial colour in well-defined iconographic contexts, and yet in situations of a more landscape-like character it

is often to be found in the lower part of the pictorial field, which suggests that in these cases it alludes to the ground.[52] To a certain extent, the background stripes can therefore be read in a straightforward sense as a succession of bands connecting the heavens to the earth. Evidence of this is found in the portrait of Saint Mark in the *Soissons Gospels* (early 9th century), in which the bottom two colour stripes, a green and a blue, are dotted with grass and plants, while the upper deep- and light-blue stripes have no plant growth whatsoever, which thus indicates that they are more celestial (FIG. 3.6).[53]

Paradise

The notion of the preciousness of the celestial sphere was not only conceived in architectonic terms; it also merged continually with concepts of Paradise, the celestial earth. In Greek culture this is expressed by, for example, Plato's *Phaedo*, in which Socrates, as mentioned, maintains that life on earth is submerged in the subterranean domain, at a distance from nobler and more real parts of the world in the higher strata of air:

> [...] the real earth, viewed from above, is supposed to look like one of these balls made of twelve pieces of skin, variegated and marked out in different colors, of which the colors which we know are only limited samples, like the paints which artists use [...]. One section is a marvelously beautiful purple, and another is golden. All that is white of it is whiter than chalk or snow, and the rest is similarly made up of the other colors, still more and lovelier than those which we have seen. Even these very hollows in the earth, full of water and air, assume a kind of color as they gleam amid the different hues around them, so that there appears to be one continuous surface of varied colors. The trees and flowers and fruits which grow upon this earth are proportionately beautiful. The mountains too and the stones have a proportionate smoothness and transparency, and their colors are lovelier. The pebbles which are so highly prized in our world – the jaspers and rubies and emeralds and the rest – are fragments of these stones, but there everything is as beautiful as they are, or better still. [...] The earth itself is adorned not only with all these stones but also with gold and silver and the other metals, for many rich veins of them occur in plain view in all parts of the earth, so that to see them is a sight for the eyes of the blessed.[54]

This vision is again not far from the ideas behind the precious medieval celestial colours, especially the strips. Their spectrum of colours is approximately the same as the precious stones' continuous "surface of varied colours" – a surface that stretches right down to the subterranean caves in the celestial world.

Fig. 3.6. *Saint Mark* (early 9th century), miniature from the *Gospels of Saint Medard of Soissons*. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms lat. 266, f. 171v.

The concept of heavens luminous with precious stones is also widespread in Judeo-Christian culture. In the Book of Isaiah (54: 11f.), God ensures the transgressor that "I will set your stones in antimony, and lay your foundations with sapphires. I will make your pinnacles of agate, your gates of carbuncles, and all your wall of precious stones."[55] In the Book of Revelation (21: 18-21) this prophecy is transferred to the New Jerusalem: "The wall was built of jasper; while the city was pure gold, clear as glass." Furthermore, the foundations of the city wall were garnished with twelve types of precious stone: jasper, sapphire, chalcedony, emerald, sardonyx, carnelian, chrysolyte, beryl, topaz, chrysoprasus, jacinth and amethyst. "And the twelve gates were twelve pearls [...]".[56]

The celestial precious stones are not restricted to the concept of the city, but are also apparent, as in Plato, in a paradisiacal nature. In Ezekiel (28: 13-14) it is said of the king of Tyrus that he had been in the Garden of Eden and there he had been covered with all manner of precious stones and gold: "[...] you were on the holy mountain of God; in the midst of the stones of fire you walked." The concept of this Paradise must be extremely old as it also appears in the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* (*c.* 1700 BC), in the garden of the immortals in the East:

> There was the garden of the gods; all round him stood bushes bearing gems. [...] [T]here was fruit of carnelian with the vine hanging from it, beautiful to look at; lapis lazuli leaves hung thick with fruit, sweet to see. For thorns and thistles there were haematite and rare stones, agate, and pearls from out of the sea.[57]

The connection between flowers, fruit, precious stones and heavens would thus seem to be surprisingly constant in Western culture. Flowers and fruit are, like precious stones, symmetrical entities having beautiful, bright colours; flower petals unfurl in the same way as the rays of light around stars and precious stones. If flowers and fruit constitute the culmination of plants' lives, the same can be said of precious stones in relation to stone for, as we saw in the last chapter, it was a common pre-modern belief that minerals and metals grow like plants. Furthermore, plants blossom at the top, at the greatest possible distance from the earth, and therefore it is obvious to compare the flower with the heavens. Where the earthly flowering is but a stage in a sequence of germination, rising, sinking and withering, the celestial counterpart is, however, characterised by permanence - permanently incorruptible and permanently raised - a state that is fulfilled in the paradisiacal coupling of precious stone and flower. The concepts are therefore inseparable from the idea of the *Tree of Life*: the Paradise tree with roots in the underworld and branches in the heavens. The Mesopotamian poem *Erra and Ishum* states that the upper part of this tree "rests on the heaven of Anu".[58] A Judaic variation of the Tree of Life is

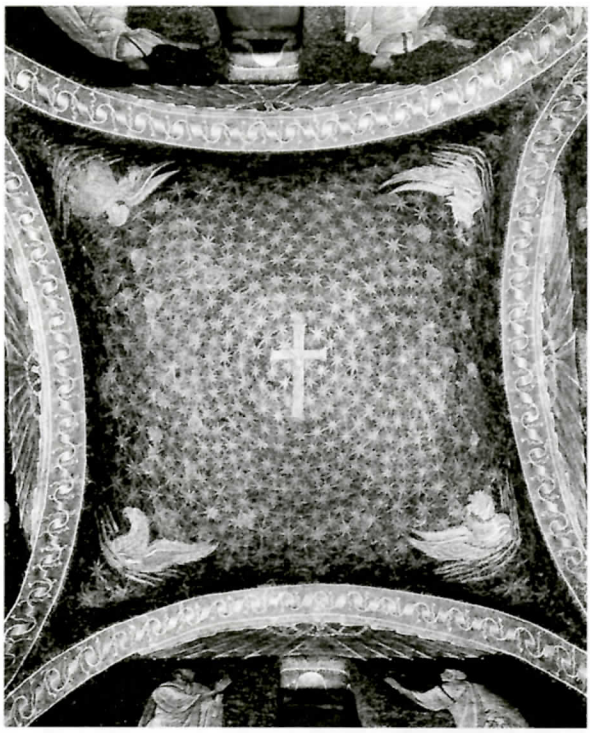

Fig. 3.7. Mosaic dome with Cross and stars (5th century). Ravenna, Mausoleum of Galla Placidia.

the seven-branched candlestick, with the flames representing the fruit of the Tree of Life and also the stars of the heavens.[59]

As demonstrated by Saint Peter Damiani and Hildegard of Bingen, this connection between stars, precious stones and flowers was a fertile motif in medieval poetry and visionary writings, playing, for instance, on the ambivalence of the Latin word *gemma*, meaning both bud and precious stone.[60] Visually the idea is illustrated in the *Adoration of the Lamb* from the *Codex Aureus of Saint Emmeram* (*c.* 870; PLATE 17), an illuminated manuscript from the Court School of Charles the Bald. The golden stars here seen gleaming in the celestial sphere are shown as circular surfaces surrounded by dots; since the Mesopotamian period at least, these shapes were a conventional sign for precious stones (FIG. 2.86). The same sign, this time in light brown, recurs in the flowers on the rocks around *Terra*. Thus the *Adoration of the Lamb* shows that the stars of the heavens are nobler instances of the flowers of the earth. Medieval architectonic domes – earthly copies of the firmament[61] – also demonstrate this coupling of stars and flowers. In the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna (5th century), for example, the dome's celestial gold is sprinkled with stars around a Cross, as if it were a paradisiacal flower carpet (FIG. 3.7).[62]

In the case of two-dimensional media, the iconography of precious stones, stars and flowers reaches a climax in Gothic illuminated manuscripts. At first, the blue firmaments are covered with star patterns that look like arrangements of precious stones. Later, patterns of flowers, vines and squares are spread across the sky as if it were a carpet. In a *c.* 1165 depiction of the world egg, derived from Hildegard of Bingen's visions, the firmament is also shown as this kind of flower carpet (FIG. 3.8).

In a less specific form, but more sensually, celestial preciousness is finally apparent in the many depictions of *clouds* called forth by celestial revelations. In a typical high medieval mosaic decoration such as that of Santa Prassede, Rome (9th century), for example, Christ does not stand in Judgement surrounded by a bright rainbow mandorla, but within a complex of small, elongated clouds in shades of red, blue and green (FIG. 15).[63] Bearing in mind that such clusters of revelatory clouds appear as far back as in the early Christian mosaics – for example, in Santa Pudenziana, Rome (early 5th century) – the Roman rhetorician Ausonius (*c.* 310-95) is presumably alluding to an actual painting practice when, in an introductory letter to his poem *Cupido Cruciatus* ("The Tormented Cupid"), he compares this poem to "a cloud painted upon a wall" (*nebulam pictam in pariete*) in order to highlight the intangibility of its subject.[64] As can be seen from the mosaics in San Clemente, the picturesque potential of clouds is expanded in the Late Middle Ages when colours begin to intermingle within the individual clouds, as if we are brought face-to-face with the atmospheric effects of a sunrise (FIG. 2.45). Images such as these give an inkling that the atmosphere and its light refractions are the stuff from which the modern painting will be born.

Haloes

If the coloured skies in medieval painting symbolise, in very general terms, the spirit's emanation in the world hierarchy, this significance is acutely exposed when we focus on the type of sky divided into coloured bands. In order to explicate this potential, we can compare the bands with more iconographically fixed representations of light such as celestial globe, celestial sphere, rainbow, mandorla, nimbus and clipeus. All of these are often depicted in medieval art by one or more coloured bands, and that they are actually affiliated becomes apparent if we take the following factors into consideration. The mandorla and the clipeus are, like the nimbus, haloes within which the spirit is revealed in the earthly world. The clipeus, which originates from Roman medallion portraits of rulers or gods, plays on the similarity between the shield and the disc of the sun, as clipeus means, literally, shield.[65] While the clipeus usually only surrounds half-figure portraits, the function of the mandorla

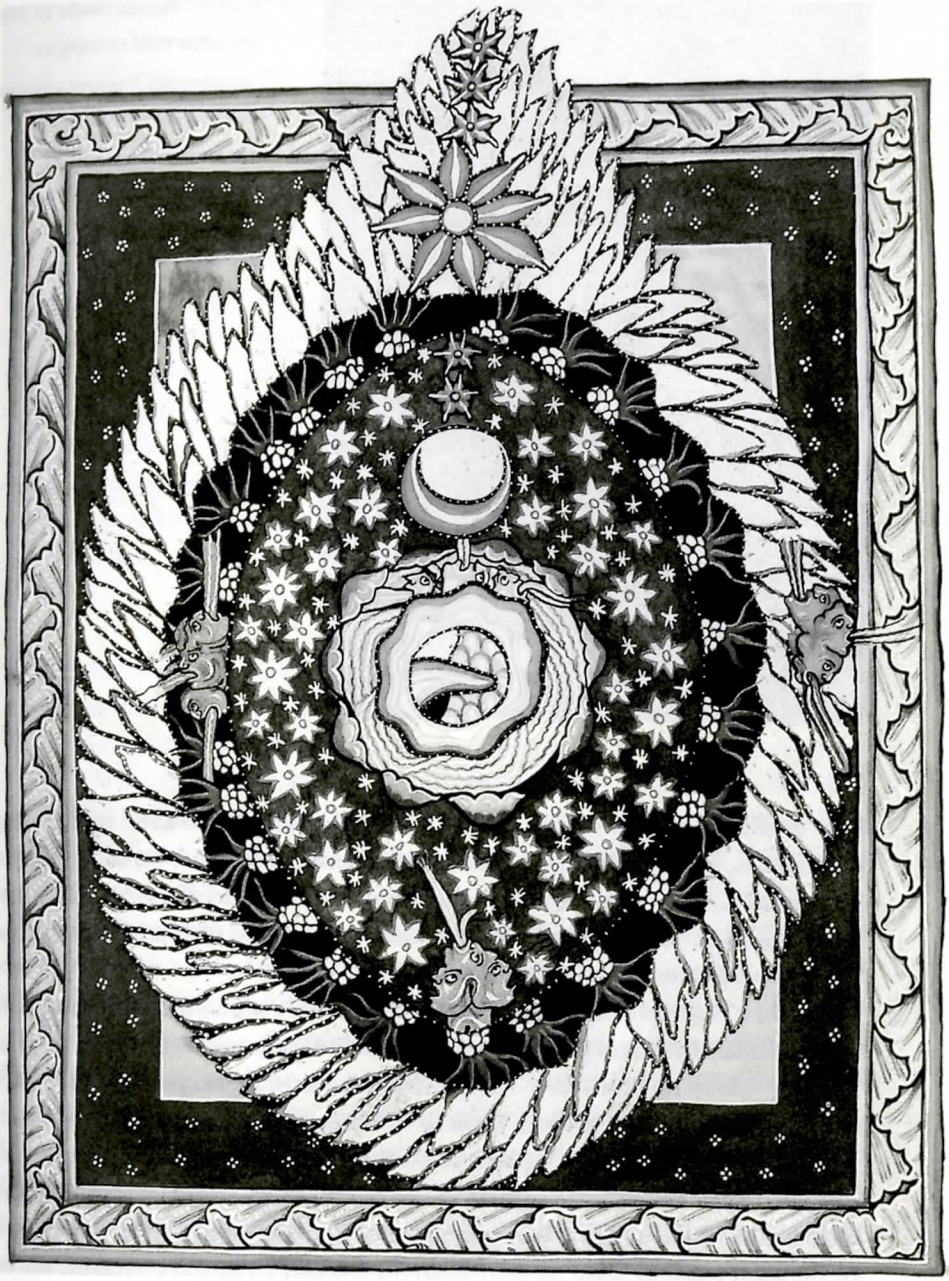

Fig. 3.8. *World Egg* (*c.* 1165), miniature from Hildegard of Bingen's *Liber Scivias*, executed in what is today southern Germany. Wiesbaden, Hessische Landesbibliothek, cod. 1.

Fig. 3.9. *Majestas Domini* (*c.* 869), miniature from Carolingian sacramentary fragment executed in Metz. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms lat. 1141, f. 5.

is to contain the whole figure, especially the enthroned Christ. Even though the mandorla is, in all probability, a 5th-century adaptation of monumental Buddhist aureoles of light,[66] it is still related to the nimbus, for when Servius explains Venus' luminous nocturnal appearance in the *Aeneid* (2, 590), he writes "in the light: in the cloud [*in nimbo*] that always is with deities."[67]

All these versions of light can be seen as subsets of cosmos: areas with particular spiritual intensity. But in practice the boundaries to the cosmic totality are surprisingly capricious. An illustrative example of this is a Carolingian sacramentary fragment from Metz (*c.* 869), in which Christ is enthroned astride a celestial globe which has exactly the same kind of spherical divisions as the mandorla that surrounds him (FIG. 3.9).[68] In both, the colours of the bands change in accordance with the architecture of the medieval heavens: farthest out, the divine heavens symbolised by the most precious material, gold; next, the emerald green and crystalline sea of glass in front of Christ's throne, mentioned in the Book of Revelation;[69] and inmost, the indestructible heavens' lower section, the visible and azure firmament. In this manifestation, the mandorla is thus not merely a local appearance, but rather the celestial spheres in their entirety. An immediate explanation for this coupling can

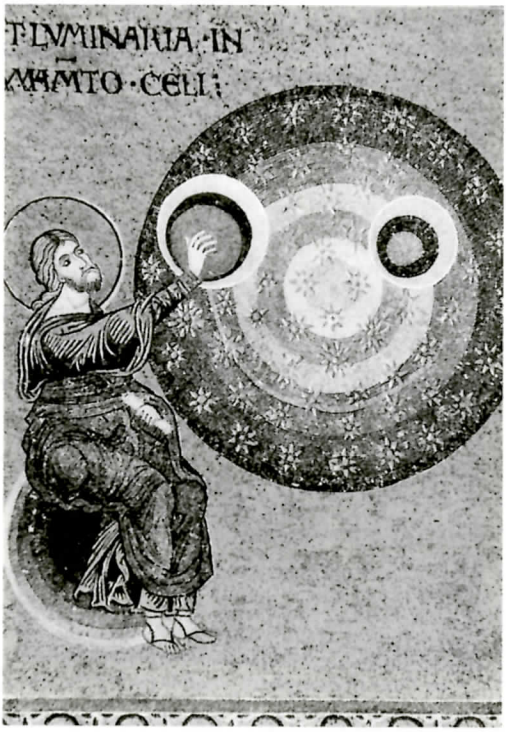

Fig. 3.10. *Creation* (*c.* 1185-91), mosaic. Monreale, Cathedral.

perhaps be found in the antique concept of the *world egg* – the earth as the yolk in an egg of celestial spheres – as, like the mandorla, the egg has much the shape of an ellipse (FIG. 3.8).[70]

The juxtaposition of celestial globe and mandorla is in a way paradoxical. While the spirit in the celestial globe is transmitted from the outside inwards – from the heavens to the earth – the direction of movement in the mandorla is the exact opposite – from the divine power centre outwards. However, as a result of the Mainz fragment's joining of globe and mandorla, the illuminator has had to unify the two and also to surround the mandorla with gold. Elsewhere in medieval art, in Monreale's creation scene, for example, the roles are reversed: here the newly-created firmament actually has gold at the centre, whereas the azure of the fixed star sphere has ended up on the periphery (FIG. 3.10). This arrangement is also characteristic of the widespread medieval symbol, the *Hand of God*, which breaks through from the centre of a sphere identical with the celestial globe (FIGS. 9, 2.102 and 2.104).

The paradox of centre and periphery reflects, however, a fundamental tension in the medieval perception of God. Johannes Scotus Erigena's (800-77) *De divisione naturae* states explicitly that God's place is identical with *visio Dei*, God's vision,

which is both outside and inside the world.[71] The ambiguity is perfectly expressed in the Majestas figure. Christ's seat on the rainbow – the periphery of the world – is the same point as that which constitutes the centre of the mandorla, a figure with associations both to the world globe and to a seeing eye. In the aforementioned depiction of the world egg from around 1165, the ellipse form even narrows at the top, exactly as if it were an eye (FIG. 3.8).

It is tempting to read into this ambiguity an incipient modern dualism of subject and infinite surroundings. At the same time as God's infinity is shifted ever further outwards, in tandem with the material world's expansion to the regions of ether, his eye appears in the middle of the earthly domain: a middle that is not only to be understood as the centre of the earth, but equally as God's incarnation in the human individual, represented by Christ. In representing the world egg as God's eye, it is especially possible to move from the world in its entirety to the world as it appears *reflected* in an eye. This duality is developed in late medieval nominalism with its distinction between the world itself and the human concept of it.

This movement is corroborated by a Christian tendency to de-localise the divine altogether; for example, of certain philosophers, Augustine asks:

> Can these philosophers possibly regard the divine nature as unenclosed, unbounded, and unextended in space, and admit, as right feeling about God requires them to, that it is everywhere incorporeally present in its entirety, while at the same time asserting that it is absent from the vast spaces outside the universe, and is busy with only the one place in which the universe is located, tiny though it is in comparison with the infinite space of which we have spoken?[72]

Even though Augustine's world is still divided into the spiritual and the material, the cleft is thus healed in God, the omnipresent power centre.

Another entity comprising rays of light and linking the local to the universal is the *rainbow*. The Biblical sources to the Majestas Domini vision report that the enthroned Christ is surrounded by a garland resembling a rainbow. According to Ezekiel (1: 26-28):

> And above the expanse over their heads there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance. And upward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed all around. And downward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness around him. Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around.

Fig. 3.11. *Majestas Domini Carried by Two Angels* (11th century), miniature from *Otto III's Prayer Book* executed in Mainz. Pommersfelden, Gräflich Schönborgsche Bibliothek, Cod. 2940, f. 27.

And in the Book of Revelation (4: 2-3): "At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald." If the origin of the mandorla is, more generally, nimbus-like aureoles, it is thus here theologically linked to the rainbow. Its connection with the celestial sphere is thereby invested with more substance, as the rainbow was an obvious choice of image for these spheres. After the Flood, the rainbow is a sign of the new covenant between the Lord and all future generations (Genesis 9: 13): "I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth." An illustration of this connection between rainbow and celestial globe is seen, for example, in the 6th-century *Vienna Genesis* (Vienna, Nationalbibliothek); God's hand is here revealed through the very blue-red arc that the same hand establishes as a peace covenant. The symbolism is elaborated by the Church Fathers; for example, Basil the Great (*c.* 330-79) interprets the rainbow as the Trinity and – in a closely-related variant – as Christ's three components of heavenly origin (blue), passion (red) and mission on earth (green).[73]

The rainbow thus, in a remarkably straightforward fashion, illustrates the celestial hierarchy, and it is therefore not much of a leap to make it Christ's throne as,

according to Holy Scripture, Christ was indeed enthroned on the top of the firmament. This is the case in countless medieval Majestas Domini, where Christ's throne does not consist of a full celestial globe as in the Metz fragment, but only of one or two rainbow-like fragments of arc, sliced by the sides of the mandorla (FIGS. 3.11 and 2.98).[74] The rainbow's position in this kind of celestial power-symbolism goes at least as far back as late antiquity. In the 5th-century *Vergilius Romanus* manuscript, for example, the Olympian assembly led by Jupiter, is shown against a background of a firmament with sun, moon, stars and a rainbow coloured red, white and green.[75] Presumably already here the rainbow alludes to the celestial spheres, as the connection between celestial spheres and rainbow can in any case be traced back to Babylon, where the seven levels of the ziggurats were glazed in the colours of the rainbow as a symbol of the stairway to the heavens.[76]

The celestial allusions of the rainbow are lavishly disclosed by Sedulius Scotus, an Irish grammarian who worked at the Carolingian court at Liège in the mid-9th century:

> Although the rainbow graces the starry regions,
> its arc curving in the high heavens wet with dew,
> four-coloured, its saffron step leaving its imprint
> and reflecting the glittering rays of the sun,
> a second rainbow – if I may say so –glitters splendidly,
> its many different colours changing, in your house.
> The colour first in order is a brilliant gleaming gold,
> then follows a vivid green in its spring-time finery,
> a choice scarlet glows, wondrous to see,
> and a smiling sapphire spreads its beauty to the stars,
> above and below a brilliant transparency shines
> revelling in its likeness to the bluish-grey sheen of the sea.
> The sweet beauty of the noble cross of God enthroned on high
> is depicted where the multicoloured glass traces its outline.
> Gold and green, colours of saffron and copper,
> are suited to the Lord God who reigns over the stars:
> thus the red and green tell of Him suffering as a man from His wounds,
> and the gold and bronze refer to God's majesty.
> Apollo loves such a building and with his gleaming locks
> hallows it in his light as he looks down from heaven.
> In autumn the calm of spring holds sway here,
> and the cloudy season of winter becomes summer.[77]

Fig. 3.12. *Saint Matthew* (*c.* 870), miniature from the *Codex Aureus of Saint Emmeram*, from the Court School of Charles the Bald, executed in Regensburg. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, ms Clm. 4000, f. 16.

The whole celestial spectrum of the rainbow is thus reviewed in this poem: its colours allude to Paradise's spring and summer, to the indestructible precious stones and metals of the celestial architecture, and to the Trinity and the Passion of Christ.

This comprehensive display of the rainbow's symbolism could fittingly take us back to the image culture of the Middle Ages, in which the rainbow is just one among several iconographically well-defined phenomena – celestial globe, celestial sphere, mandorla, nimbus and clipeus – which are expressed by colourful bands: a clear sign that the transitions between clouds, spiritual power centres and the heavens in their totality are fairly nebulous. If we also bear in mind that numerous skies in medieval landscape images are clad in the same striped apparel with no iconographic motivation, the conclusion would seem to be unavoidable: the skies *in the paradigm* must have a significance akin to that of the *iconographically-determined* skies.

Evidence in support of this are scenes set midway between landscape and emblem, such as, for example, the abovementioned *Adoration of the Lamb* from the *Codex Aureus of Saint Emmeram* (*c.* 870; PLATE 17). Here the lamb's clipeus floats

on a background of golden stars and blue, green and light-brown celestial segments, broken at the bottom by a broader-curved, golden arc: the combined arc of the rainbow and the firmament. In the lower corner areas, under the circle of the twenty-four adoring men, personifications of Sea and Earth are, furthermore, seen surrounded by water and flower-covered rocks respectively. These corner areas give the scene the look of taking place halfway in a landscape, and the impression is substantiated by the almost horizontal celestial rainbow which, in harmony with the blue colour underneath, conjures up vestiges of the celestial bands suggestive of landscape. The connection is further corroborated by the dark and white fine lines bordering the celestial spheres of the *Adoration*, for these lines are also seen in the horizontal celestial strip behind Saint Matthew in the same manuscript (FIG. 3.12). Moreover, the lines reappear in Ottonian manuscripts, not just in the mandorlas and firmaments, but in those celestial bands suggestive of landscape (FIG. 14).[78]

Veils

Regardless of the ambiguous significance of celestial strips, they would seem very generally to provide a screen for the pure divine light. In the *Grandval Bible*'s frontispiece to Genesis (Tours, *c.* 835), this function is made clear with almost iconographic accuracy. Here, the two Paradise angels appear behind a deep-blue celestial strip, as if it was an earthly curtain covering the lighter and thereby more celestial strips in the background (PLATE 21). When Adam and Eve are expelled from this *paradisus terrestris*, however, the illuminator is obliged to double this effect and thereby contest the timelessness of the Golden Age paradigm itself: as illustration of the unkind seasons of life on earth, the entire sky is covered by a dark-brown and black-grey strip, which forms a glaring contrast to the lighter, brownish strips above the abandoned garden on the left.[79]

Scenes such as these are served by a softer version of the concept of cosmos as a building, inasmuch as the heavens here appear like a cloth that both covers up and lets through a hint of the divine light behind it.[80] As it says in Isaiah (40: 22): "It is he [...] who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in."[81] This kind of cloth symbolism found a signifier in the Roman sky god Caelus, a figure who holds a cloth unfolded like a dome above his head. We encounter him, for example, on the armour of the statue of Augustus from the House of Livia at Prima Porta[82] and again on the early Christian *Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus* (359 AD), where his cloth serves as a footstool for the enthroned Christ (FIG. 3.13).[83] In one and the same image, therefore, the celestial drapery is coupled with Ezekiel's vision of Christ enthroned on the sapphire-blue firmament. As is indicated in a Constantinopolitan miniature from the early 10th century, for example,

Fig. 3.13. *Majestas Domini* (359 AD), relief from the *Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*. Rome, Vatican, Musei Vaticani.

Fig. 3.14. *Nyx*, detail from *Isaiah's Prayer* (*c.* 900-950), miniature from the *Paris Psalter*, executed in Constantinople. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms gr. 139.

the celestial cloth can also appear in another antique personification: the female Nyx (Night), concealed under a drapery sprinkled with trefoils of stars (FIG. 3.14). The iconography here points quite clearly to the trefoil as suggestive of celestial stars, but the association to the heavens must also be implicated in the countless examples where this pattern adorns drapery but without any specific explanation (e.g. FIG. 3.15).[84] The significance of the unbroken azure of the heavens, on the other hand, is evident from the Virgin Mary's blue tunic, an earthly reflection of the firmament's pure and virginal colour.

Clouds are also an important ingredient of this celestial cloth hierarchy; the psalmist, for example, states (18: 11): "He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him, thick clouds dark with water [...]." And the Book of Revelation (10: 1): "Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire."[85] Just such an angel, wrapped in billowing cloud apparel, is seen, for example, in

Fig. 3.15. *Saint John* (*c.* 1020), miniature from the *Hitda Codex*, executed in Cologne. Darmstadt, cod. 1640.

a 12th-century *Beatus Manuscript* (FIG. 3.16).[86] A miniature illustrating the cloud-drapery link in a more paradigmatic way is found in the *Hitda Codex*, an Ottonian gospel book completed in Cologne around 1020 (FIG. 3.15). Here, as part of the varied cloud cover that provides the backing to John the Evangelist, there is a strip bearing a striking similarity to lace, and that it should actually be understood as such would seem to be indicated by the fact that the edges of the Evangelist's gown are adorned with exactly the same pattern.[87] However, as is always the case in the relationship between the various ingredients of celestial symbolism, the distinction between clouds and the heavens in their entirety is blurred. In depictions of the solar and lunar eclipses that are presumed to have taken place during the Crucifixion, the obscuring of the light sources is accordingly often symbolised by the personifications of the two heavenly bodies holding draperies to their faces (FIG. 3.17).

Like the celestial spheres, the rainbow and mandorla, the clouds become quite

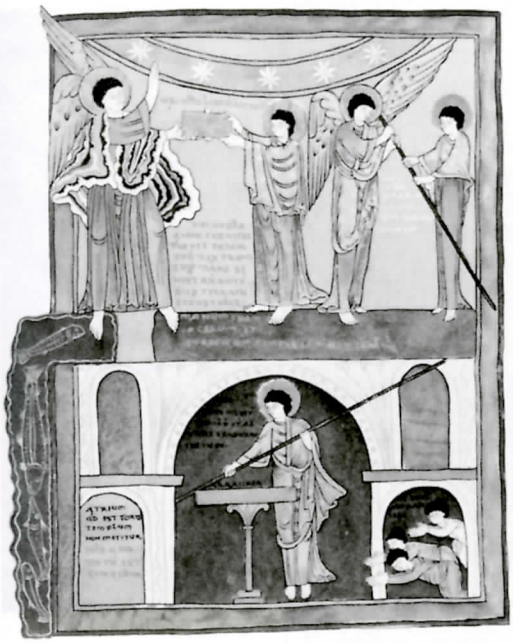

Fig. 3.16. *The Mighty Angel, Standing on the Sea and the Land, Delivers the Little Book to Saint John the Evangelist* (12th century), miniature from *Beatus Manuscript*. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms lat. 8878, f. 150v.

Fig. 3.17. *Crucifixion* (*c.* 1040-50), miniature from *Judith of Flanders' Gospels* executed in Winchester. New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, ms 709, f. 1v.

literally a medium through which the divine spirit *dresses* in earthly material. In the same fashion as Jahve's revelation, Christ, on three occasions, surrounded himself with the *doxa*, the bright thundercloud – at the Transfiguration, the Ascension and the Second Coming[88] – and this manner of appearance was compared by many commentators to the manner in which the Holy Spirit impregnated the Virgin Mary. For, according to Luke (1: 35), Gabriel had said to her: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you [...]." The overshadowing was not only interpreted as a cloud that enveloped Mary at the moment of conception, it was identified in a wider sense with her own body and with the body that she allowed to grow around the divine seed in her womb. Isaiah's prophecy (19: 1), "Behold, the Lord is riding on a swift cloud [*nubem leuem*] and comes to Egypt", is therefore interpreted by Saint Jerome in the following way: "[...] the Lord ascends upon a light cloud, the body of the Virgin Mary, which was not burdened with the

Fig. 3.18. Miniature (*c.* 835) from the *Grandval Bible* executed in Tours. London, British Library, Add. ms 10546, f. 449.

weight of any human seed. Or certainly [the light cloud is] his own body, which was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And he entered into the Egypt of this world."[89] Because Mary conceived through the words spoken into her ear by the angel, this line of thought might also be extended to prophets, apostles and preachers. Like veritable manna from heaven, their words were to be understood as fertile dew raining down into the receptive womb of the earth, as in Isaiah (45: 8): "Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit [...]."[90]

As shown by Herbert Kessler, cloth symbolism is used in a number of Carolingian illuminated manuscripts, not least the *Grandval Bible* (Tours, *c.* 835).[91] In the miniature on folio 449, a huge Bible has been placed on an altar which is set against a background of a cloth sprinkled with trefoils of stars (FIG. 3.18). The cloth is to be understood as the firmament which, in the same way as the Holy Scripture, both conceals and gives access to the heavens. As Augustine states in his comprehensive treatment of this symbolism: "Wherefore hast thou like a Skin stretched out the

Fig. 3.19. *Day of Judgement: Christ between the Virgin Mary and Saint John the Evangelist* (1243-54), fresco. Rome, Santi Quattro Coronati, Oratorio di San Silvestro.

Firmament of thy book, that is to say those words of thine [...]."[92] The symbolism is elaborated in the lower scene of the miniature, in which a figure – possibly alluding to Moses, Saint Paul and Saint John alike – holds a cloth stretched dome-like above his head, exactly as Caelus does. The threefold identity is due to the fact that all three figures, in an increasing degree of clarity, had allegedly seen God: Moses on Mount Sinai, Saint Paul in the third heaven and Saint John on Patmos.

Even Saint John is, however, only a medium, halfway between the concealing and revealing, for at his side stands the angel from Patmos blowing a horn that goes up to his mouth. The arrangement is presumably designed to show that Saint John, in the most literal sense, is a *persona*, a mask, through which the celestial voice is manifested (*persona*=mask, according to medieval etymology derived from *persono*=I make a continuous noise). By holding the celestial cloth, however, he also represents the way to the ultimate disclosure of the spirit, as evident in the title: *Revelation*. When the sixth seal is broken (6: 12f.), one of the consequences is that "[t]he sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up" (FIG. 3.19).[93] The scroll is

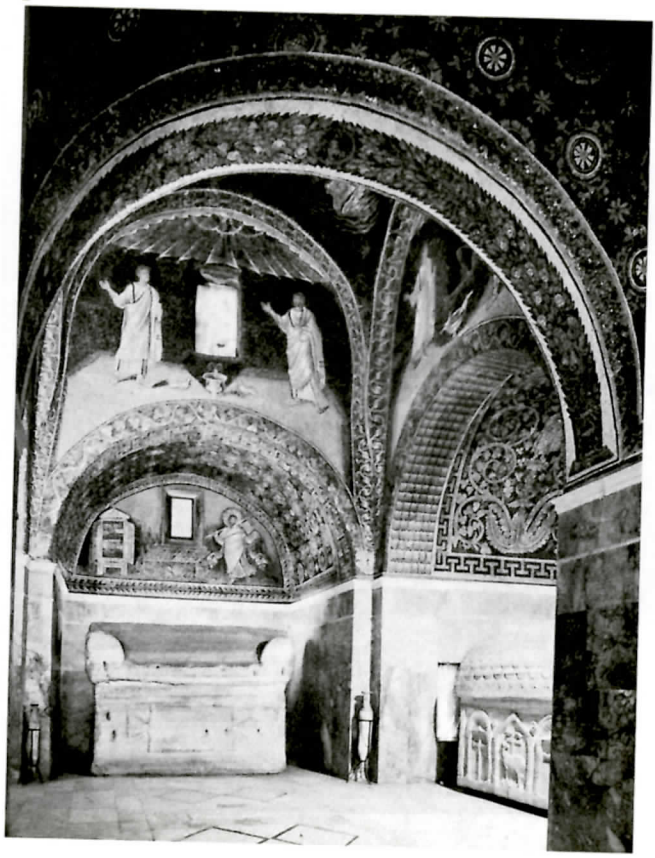

Fig. 3.20. Interior, Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna (5th century).

thus again being seen in the double role of the skin that shields the heavens, and as the Bible's written pages, which conceal the unimpeded spiritual vision.

If we feel in need of a bridge from cloth imagery to the aforementioned precious stone symbolism, it could be accounted for by the idea of precious draperies. The Book of Exodus provides detailed instructions as to how the holy clothing should be made – tabernacle and temple curtains, tent of the Ark of the Covenant and garments of the priests – recommending the use of magnificent colours such as blue, scarlet, purple and gold.[94] As these colours in themselves are made up of precious materials, they are obviously related to the celestial magnificence, and the connection is confirmed by the breastplates of the priests: a garment with settings of the same twelve precious stones that are later found in the wall foundations of the New Jerusalem – one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel.[95] The celestial symbolism of cloth is also manifest at the Crucifixion. The temple curtain being rent in two, immediately after Jesus has yielded up the spirit,[96] is simultaneously a symbol of

hierogamy – the heavens' penetration of the underworld – and of the tearing up of the old covenant in favour of the new with its accompanying clear-sightedness.

In the three-dimensional art, the covering of the heavens is displayed, as mentioned, in church domes, which are often adorned with celestial representations such as gold, sapphire blue or stars. A widespread celestial symbol for the adornment of hemidomes, alcoves or their illusionistic re-creation in images, often interwoven with the canopy, is found in the form of the scallop shell (FIG. 3.20).[97] The shell shape is reminiscent of the celestial spheres, its undulating surface suggests cloth, and it closes around the pearl in the same way as the cave roof shielded the birth of Christ.

Cloudscapes in Carolingian miniatures

As the medieval celestial hierarchy is extended towards an ever more faraway God, a de-localised infinity, it breaks down the differences in status between the celestial spheres and the air and, ultimately, also between the heavens and the lowest elements: water and earth. This extreme polarisation between a divine there and a material here which, however, includes everything from rocks to ether, would seem to be thematicised in Carolingian illuminated manuscripts. Firstly, we can see that the Carolingian illuminators often abandoned the rock-solid earth, and would instead let the cloud world form the ground for their narrative or iconic figures. When the harp-playing David steps out in dance in the *Vivian Bible* (Tours, 845-46), he does so within a landscape of dark-blue clouds, the whitish contours of which fashion platforms for himself and his entourage of musicians and guards (FIG. 3.21).[98]

The cloud world might also enter into close, montage-like connections with the actual land formations and with the curtains, if the composition of the miniature is arranged on different levels. This is the case, for example, with the frontispiece to Deuteronomy in the *Bible from San Paolo fuori le mura* (Rheims (?), *c.* 870; FIG. 3.22). The blue-white Mount Nebo at the top right – the ground under Moses as he beholds the land of Canaan (Deuteronomy 32: 49) – does not act as an independent land mass, but imperceptibly merges into the three celestial stripes below, behind Moses addressing Israel. Similarly, the bottom lilac strip is closely connected with the equally lilac rock on the left.[99] An even more noticeable similarity between clouds and land formations – this time within the same framework – is found in Fuldaian 10th-century miniatures such as the *Adoration of the Magi* (*c.* 975; FIG. 3.23).[100] In this, both parties – clouds and rocks – appear as rows of bulbs, and the plants trickling out between the rocks at the bottom are echoed in the smaller clouds budding at the top.

It will now be my contention that the Carolingian manuscript illuminators and their successors play quite consciously on the similarities between clouds and

Fig. 3.21 *David Dancing* (845-46), miniature from the *Vivian Bible*, executed in Tours. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms lat. 1, f. 215v.

rocks, indeed often present them as identical phenomena.[101] The ambiguity is very clear-cut in the frontispiece of the *Aachen Gospels* (early 9th century), where the four Evangelists at their writing are placed against separate backgrounds of steel-blue land mass (PLATE 22).[102] That these masses are made up of rocks is emphasised by the rugged profiles and the row of trees rising up behind the two formations at the back. However, if we look at the Evangelist symbols emerging from these masses, we would think that they are actually clouds because the pockets in which the half-length figures are sitting would seem to have appeared without any great exertion, as if the four creatures could change places in the enveloping mass without further ado. A similar ambiguity is manifest in the *Codex Aureus of Saint Emmeram* (*c.* 870). In the celestial sphere above the portrait of Saint Luke, the ox appears behind a formation that looks to be made of fanciful crystals rather than clouds (FIG. 3.24). On the other hand, bushes and trees grow out of the blue, wavy cloud strip hovering in the airspace above the portrait of Saint Matthew (FIG. 3.12).[103]

Presumably, the complex of thoughts that provokes hallucinatory images such as these is to some extent of a Platonic and Neoplatonic character. In *Phaedo* we heard about a celestial world with trees, flowers, mountains and stones, all of which were made of more fantastic colours and materials than their earthly counterparts.

Fig. 3.22. *Frontispiece to Deuteronomy* (*c.* 870), miniature from the *Bible from San Paolo fuori le mura*, executed in Rheims (?). Rome, Abbazia di San Paolo fuori le mura, f. 50 (lxviiii)v.

Fig. 3.23. *Adoration of the Magi* (*c.* 975), miniature from Fulda manuscript. Rome, Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ms Vat. lat. 3548, f. 14.

Fig. 3.24. *Saint Luke* (*c.* 870), miniature from the *Codex Aureus of Saint Emmeram*, from the Court School of Charles the Bald, executed in Regensburg. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, ms Clm. 14000, f. 65.

Similar visions are found in writings by Church Fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa (*c.* 331-*c.* 394) and Origen. Gregory declares: "If we, in one way or another, could be winged by *logos* so that we were on the back of the firmament, we would there find the extra-celestial earth, the one that is reserved as heritage for those who have lived in accordance with virtue."[104] And Origen:

> It is therefore I think that just as this lower and drier soil in which we live is the soil of the lower heaven, this being the firmament, so the upper place, which we correctly call the heaven, has a soil in which its celestial inhabitants live and which is, so to speak, the back of our firmament and which is correctly called the earth of this heaven; but this is the good, holy earth, the earth of the living.[105]

It is very likely a version of this peculiar continuity in the duality between the celestial and the earthly that is depicted in the Carolingian cloudscapes. As I have suggested a number of times, harking back to the classical period there was indeed a certain potential to smooth the transitions between the depths of the earth – the world's flesh – and the mass of the clouds, as both could act as incarceration or womb for the divine seed. The underworld is certainly enclosed in dense rock masses, but when the heavens are filled with thunder clouds it is – as Lucretius remarks – as if "all the darkness has deserted Acheron to fill the great caverns of the sky".[106] Therefore, earthquakes and thunder clouds can both be seen as hierogamic phenomena; both are caused by pneuma confined within matter. Therefore, too, the key is the only difference when the temple is blocked by smoke from the glory of God (Book of Revelation 15: 8) and when the sun and the air are darkened by smoke from the bottomless pit (Book of Revelation 9: 2).

It would seem the Carolingian images also find impetus in the Biblical sea of glass, where the celestial and the earthly are similarly refracted in a suggestive fashion: the sea of glass is fluid and yet crystalline, mixed with fire and yet hard as a mirror. The influence seems to be particularly clear in the *Codex Aureus of Saint Emmeram*: above Saint Mark (**FIG. 3.12**) the clouds are shaped like flames, above Saint John they look like waves topped with narrow, frothy tips. Again, this is approaching landscape given that the same kind of frothy amorphous contours also surround the tree silhouettes at the top of the rocks in the *Coronation Gospels*' portrait of Saint Mark (late 8th century).[107]

This interpretation is only corroborated if the Carolingian portraits of the Evangelists are seen from a bird's-eye perspective. In portraits such as the *London* and *Berlin Gospels*, the symbols emerge from behind the clouds, above inscribed horizontal bands. The same clouds and the same bands appear in the *Dufay* and *Lemans Gospels*, but now with the Evangelists placed at the centre of quarter-circle

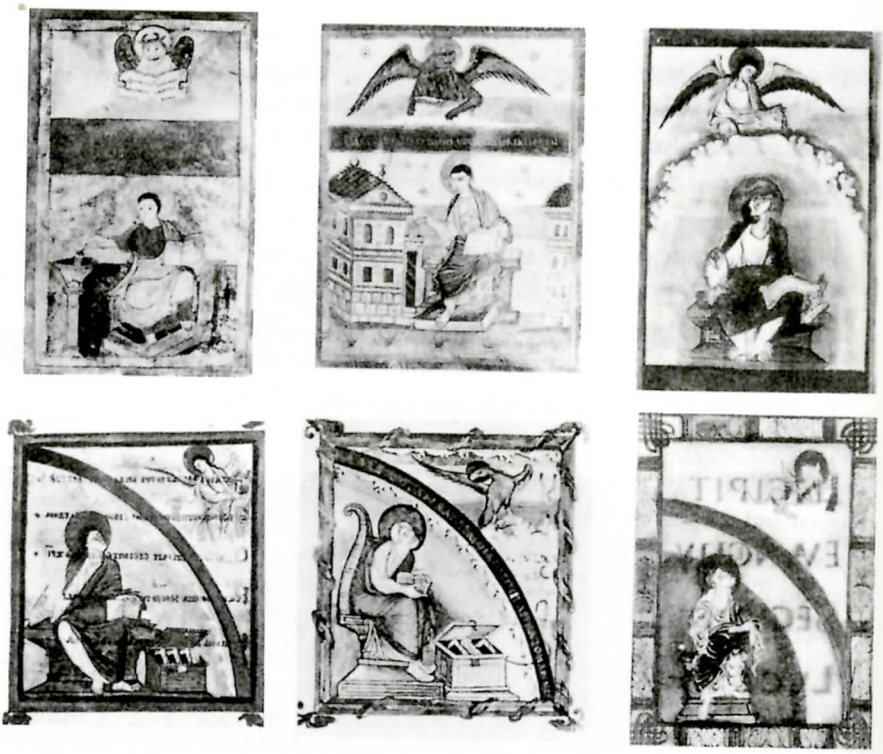

Fig. 3.25. Carolingian Evangelist portraits: *Luke* (London, British Library, Add. ms 11848), *Mark* (Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, ms Theol. Lat. Fol. 733), *Matthew* (*Lothar Gospels*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms lat. 266), *Matthew* (*Dufay Gospels*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms lat. 9385), *John* (*Dufay Gospels*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms lat. 9385), *Luke* (*Lemans Gospels*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms lat. 261).

segments (FIG. 3.25). In both types, the bands can be understood as the firmament, so what has been changed is not the scene as such but just the angle: in the first it is earth-bound, in the second it is more cosmic, as if the cloud-lined circle segments form a Platonic cave vault. As a sign of how closely the landscape angle and the cosmic angle are connected, the same arched form can, however, change identity from concave (world cave) to convex (earthly mass). In the *Lothar Gospels* (FIG. 3.25), the Evangelists are thus seated in front of spherical banks of clouds, and in the *Ebo Gospels* (FIG. 3.26) in front of ditto rocks.[108]

An obvious question is now why these blendings of the earthly and the celestial should occur at exactly this moment in the Middle Ages. In order to understand

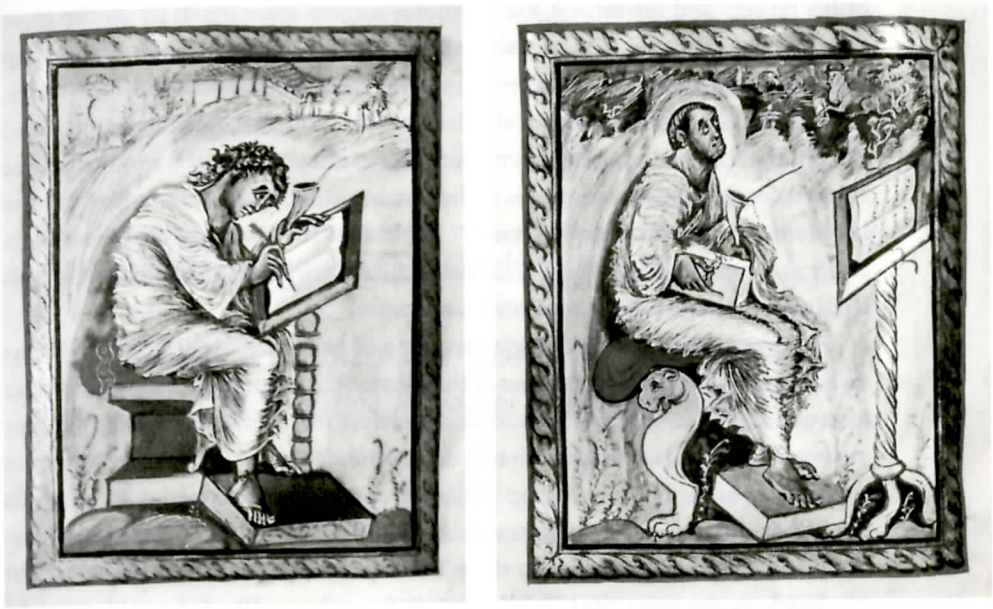

Fig. 3.26. *Matthew* and *Luke* (*c.* 816-35), miniatures from the *Ebo Gospels* executed in Rheims. Épernay, Bibliothèque Municipale, ms 1.

why, it is again necessary to look at the Middle Ages as a transitional phase during which the seeds of the modern world picture gradually begin to take root. In the Late Middle Ages, the chief threats to the geocentric world picture are, on the one hand, that not only God but also the material universe is infinite and, on the other, that the visible heavens are just as changeable and destructible as the earth. Even though the High Middle Ages still favour a divine and eternal heaven, this has already shifted so far out into the cosmos that the earthly sphere has begun to consume that which had earlier been celestial. The Carolingian Renaissance can be seen as the epicentre of this process: simultaneously the last bastion of antiquity and the vanguard of modernity.

In the Carolingian Court poetry, Charlemagne's omnipotence thus becomes a metaphor for a new desire for expansion, which embraces both the horizontal and vertical space. In the poem *Karolus Magnus et Leo Papa*, Einhard sings of pushing the oars onwards, "forward to where the light breeze calls, sailing over the deep [...], rapidly to speed in the direction of unknown lands". The same poem praises Charlemagne's outstanding name, which "is broadcast to the stars", "the loftiness

of his power" and his second Rome whose "mighty mass [rises] up to the great heights, the lofty cupolas on its walls touching the sky", whose church "mounts up to heaven" and whose "vast din beats upon the heavens".[109] And when, in the 840s, the Carolingian empire has been divided between Lothar, Louis the German and Charles the Bald, we hear the lament from Florus of Lyons that the empire had not enjoyed continued protection from "the timeless ruler of the skies, who can raise kingdoms on earth into the heavens."[110] In passages like these, we are witnessing a desire to contain the heavens within the domain of earth, a desire which corresponds strikingly to the Carolingian painted landscapes.

Having observed the Carolingian levelling of heavens and earth, it also seems easier to understand the landscapes of the subsequent Ottonian art, in which image formulae have become more abstract and therefore more difficult to judge in terms of content. Although straightforward rocky grounds are not a rarity, the Ottonian landscape space is always made up of flat expanses: either coloured celestial bands or pure gold grounds. The figures would often seem to float around without paying the least spatial attention to these flat expanses. Joseph's feet blithely cover two bands at the same time; angels emerge from the midst of the gold grounds; and, most curiously of all, cities are seen hovering on the pure gold ground, even though their foundations are shaped like the embedded root of a tooth as if they are protruding from an undulating terrain (FIG. 14).[111]

It is tempting here to resort to parallels in the pre-antique pictorial space – that is, to a purely primitivistic interpretation – but this would not lead us into the core of the phenomenon. As already mentioned, the antique pictorial space is not forgotten in the Middle Ages, just 'deconstructed' and, the Ottonian figures can therefore still be ascribed some kind of relationship to the background. Precisely what kind of relationship is apparent when we recall the link between the Evangelist symbols and the rocks in the *Aachen Gospels*: even though the animals seemed to float in pure nothingness, this nothingness was still made up of a mass of matter that only partially allowed the divine spirit to pass through. Bearing in mind the continuity from the underworld to the clouds to the ether, we realise that even the gold ground itself conceals this divine light. This is why it can act as a kind of ground terrain for urban foundations.

It cannot be stressed enough how important this reciprocal celestial investment of substance and earthly divestment of substance is for the genesis of modern pictorial space. It is here that we find the seeds of an illusionism that does not favour the body at the expense of the environment, but allows both to level out in an infinity which has but one orientation: the subjectively-determined perspective. In order to reach this point, then, the medieval celestial curtain need only be rent, so that the contained deity, infinity, will flood the pictorial foreground.

Jacob Wamberg

Landscape as World Picture

Tracing Cultural Evolution in Images

VOLUME I

From the Palaeolithic Period to the Middle Ages

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