

IL LUOGO ED IL RUOLO
DELLA CITTÀ DI BOLOGNA
TRA EUROPA CONTINENTALE
E MEDITERRANEA

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CHAOS AND THE EGG:
NEW EVIDENCE FROM A FIFTEENTH-CENTURY
BOLOGNESE ALTARPIECE

Most representations of the Creation of the World depict God creating a universe arranged in terms of the conventional, geocentric model. One might cite, for example, Bartolo di Fredi's fresco of the *Creation of the World* in the Collegia della Collegiata in San Gimignano or Giovanni di Paolo's *Creation of the World with the Expulsion of Adam and Eve* in the Metropolitan Museum in New York.¹ In both, the earth – represented as a *mappa mundi* – is located at the center of a schema representing the universe. This, in turn, is surrounded by the four elements, the seven successive planetary circles and, finally, the sphere of the fixed stars. Quite often this familiar schema appears in an abbreviated format – as a plain sphere covered with stars, such as in the historiated initial used by the Venetian branch of the Giunta press in the early sixteenth century.² For all practical purposes, however, the premise remains the same. In depictions of God creating the world, the most common formula for representing the universe is based on the familiar geo-centric model.

There is, however, one rather peculiar variant tradition in which the universe is shown as ovoid or egg-shaped.

The origin and significance of the egg-shaped universe is difficult to uncover. Most scholars believe it is a kind of sub-species of the mythological/philosophical concept of 'the cosmic egg'. Descriptions of the cosmic egg are generally found in writings related to the neo-Platonic lore associated with the *prisca theologia*, Hermes Trismegistus and Orpheus.³

1. On the iconography of the *thema mundi* as depicted in these two paintings, see K. Lippincott, *Giovanni di Paolo's Creation of the World and the tradition of the thema mundi in late medieval and renaissance art*, in *The Burlington Magazine*, cxxxii, July 1990, pp. 460-468.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 467 and Fig. 13.

3. For the best summary of the topic, see Dronke, pp. 79-99 and Appendix A, pp. 154-166. See also W.K.C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion: A Study of the Orphic Movement*, London 1935, pp. 79-107; P. Boyancé, *Une allusion à l'Oeuf orphique*, in *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire (École française de Rome)*, LII^{ème} année, 1935, fasc. 1-4, pp. 95-112 and R. Turcan, *L'oeuf orphique et les quatre éléments (Martianus Capella, De Nuptiis, II, 140)*, in *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, CLX, 1961, pp. 11-23.

The premise of these myths is that the principle of the universe was born from an egg, which was self-formed from the undifferentiated matter of primordial Chaos.

Two versions of the myth were available to medieval readers through summaries provided in the *Recognitiones* and the *Homiliae*, both of which were attributed to Clement of Alexandria.⁴ Clement relates how, after an immense period of time, Chaos took the form of a huge egg. Orpheus, he says, likens chaos to an egg, in which there was the confused matter of the primordial elements. An androgynous being hatched out of this egg. It was the principle of all matter. It made heaven out of fire and air, and the world below out of water and earth. Through the participation of this being, all other things were born and generated out of the elements. In both versions, the 'Orphic' fable is presented as if it were an integral part of Greek mythology, with comparisons made between it and similar passages in Homer and Hesiod.⁵

At the same time, the image of an egg was often used as a simple structural metaphor for the universe. Varro was credited with having said that Heaven is like an eggshell, and in the same way, the yolk is like the earth; between these two is enclosed the moisture as a kind of humidity – this is the air, in which there is warmth.⁶

The egg is also used as a model to explain the way in which the celestial spheres are mutually enclosed, or as a model for discussions on the complexity of the world-soul, on God's relationship to his created universe, and on the generation of matter.⁷ But there is little to connect these liter-

4. pseudo-Clement, *Recognitiones*, x, 17 and x, 30-31 (see *Die Pseudoklementinen. II. Recognitionen in Rufins Übersetzung*, ed. B. Rehm, Berlin 1965, pp. 336-337 and 346-347 and Dronke, 1974, pp. 83-85 and Appendix A, pp. 154-155); and pseudo-Clement, *Homiliae*, vi, 3-6 and vi, 19 (see *The Clementine Homilies [Ante-Nicene Christian Library, xvii]*, English transl. P. Peterson, Edinburgh 1870, pp. 117-119 and 125-126).

5. pseudo-Clement, *Recognitiones*, 30-31 (ed. Rehm, pp. 346-347) and pseudo-Clement, *Homiliae*, vi, 3. The references are to Homer, *Iliad*, vii, 99 and Hesiod, *Theogony*, l. 116.

6. Varro, *apud* 'Probus', *In Verg. Buc.*, vi, 31 in *Servii Grammatici Commentarii*, ed. H. Hagen, Leipzig 1902, iii, 2 (Appendix Serviana) p. 341: 'Caelum ut testa, item vitellum ut terra, inter illa duo humor quasi *ἰχμᾶς*, inclusus aer, in quo calor'. English transl. taken from Dronke, 1974, p. 80.

7. J.K. Wright, *The Geographical Lore of the Time of the Crusades: A Study in the History of Medieval Science and Tradition in Western Europe*, New York 1925, pp. 150-152 and 423-426; F. Ghisalberto, *Mediaeval Biographies of Ovid*, in *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, ix, 1946, pp. 10-59, esp. p. 27, n. 3, 52, 53, 55, 58 and 59; M.L. Lechner, *Ei in Reallexikon für*

ary constructions with the philosophical context of the Orphic egg, particularly since, in virtually all of these cases, the universe is described as being 'egg-like' rather than as specifically 'egg-shaped'.⁸

Descriptions of a universe that is actually ovoid are much more rare. The tradition of a spherical universe was too well-established to allow room for alternative proposals. Nevertheless, there is one example worth noting: Cassiodorus, in the *Institutiones*, reports that

Varro, a most diligent writer, has in his *Geometry* compared the world's shape to an elliptical roundness, representing its form to be like that of an egg, which is circular from side to side, but elliptical from end to end.⁹

Cassiodorus also dismisses Varro's opinion as both absurd and contrary to the Holy Scripture.¹⁰

Against this background, the appearance of three illustrations of an ovoid universe during the middle years of the twelfth century seems rather remarkable. Two of these appear as illustrations to Hildegard of Bingen's series of mystical dream-sequences, the *Liber Scivias*.¹¹ The *Scivias* itself was written between 1141 and 1150. One manuscript version, the Wiesbaden Codex, was written and illuminated either under Hildegard's personal supervision or was prepared soon after her death in 1179, under her immediate tradition.¹² The second early manuscript, the Hei-

Antike und Christentum, Stuttgart 1959, iv, cols. 731-45; B. Widmer, *Eine Geschichte des Physiologus auf einem Madonnenbild der Brera*, in *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, xv, 1963, pp. 312-330, esp. p. 314, n. 3; and Dronke, 1974, pp. 79-99.

8. This distinction is highlighted by Wright (as in note 7), p. 423-424, n. 92 and Dronke, 1974, pp. 79-80.

9. Cassiodorus, *Institutiones*, II, vii, . Ed. R.A.B. Mynors, Oxford 1937, p. 157: '*... mundi quoque figuram curiosissimus Varro sublongae rotunditati in Geometriae volumine comparavit, formam ipsius ad ovi similitudinem trahens, quod in latitudine quidem rotundum sed in longitudine probatur [oblongum]*'. English transl. taken from L.W. Jones, *An Introduction to Divine and Human readings by Cassiodorus Senator*, New York 1946, p. 203. Also cited by Dronke, 1974, p. 81.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Hildegard of Bingen, *Liber Scivias*, Book 1, Vision 3. For further information on Hildegard of Bingen, see C. Singer, *The Scientific Views and Visions of Saint Hildegard (1098-1180)* in *Studies in the History and Method of Science*, Oxford 1917, I, pp. 1-55; H. Liebeschütz, *Das allegorische Weltbild der Heiligen Hildegard von Bingen*, Leipzig and Berlin, 1930; M. Böckeler, *Hildegard von Bingen, Wisse die Wege. Scivias*, Berlin 1928 and Salzburg 1954 and B. Maurmann, *Die Himmelsrichtungen im Weltbild des Mittelalters. Hildegard von Bingen, Honorius Augustodunensis und andere Autoren*, Munich 1976.

12. Wiesbaden, Hessischen Landesbibl., Ms. I. The manuscript disappeared after it was sent to Dresden in 1945. A facsimile copy exists in the Cloister Library in Eibingen.

delberg Codex, dates to the late twelfth or early thirteenth century.¹³

Hildegard describes her vision of the Creation of the Universe in the third Vision of Book I of the *Scivias*. A somewhat edited version of Hildegard's text reads as follows:

Then I saw a huge structure, rounded and shadowy, in the likeness of an egg: narrower above and below, and in the middle wide. Encircling its outer part was a lucent fire, having a kind of shadowy skin below it. In that fire was a ball of sparkling red flame (*i.e.*: the Sun) ... and three torches were ranged in order above it (*i.e.*: Mars, Jupiter, Saturn) ... From the fire surrounding the egg, a wind emerged with its blasts; and from the skin below another skin was seething ... [and] a dark fire, of such horror I could not gaze at it ... But beneath that dark skin ... I saw a ball of whitely-radiant fire of great size (*i.e.*: the Moon), with two torches (*i.e.*: Mercury and Venus) ... [and below this there was] a wind emerging, with its blasts scattered everywhere throughout the structure ... And at the centre of these elements, was a large sandy ball, which the elements had encompassed in such a fashion that it could not slip this way or that.¹⁴

The full page miniature in the Wiesbaden codex faithfully reproduces all the elements of Hildegard's vision [fig. 1].¹⁵ Aside from the more personal elements of Hildegard's vision, her image of the universe has much in common with the traditional geo-centric model. The outermost layer of the universe is a flame-like cloak, covering and containing the three superior planets and the Sun. The planets are arranged in a vertical line running from the top of the schema inwards towards its center, much like contemporary diagrams of the universe appearing in Sacrobosco's *Sphaera* or Macrobius's *Commentarii in somnium Scipionis*. Beneath a second firey layer enclosing dark winds, are Venus, Mercury and the

13. Heidelberg, Universitäts-Bibl., Salem x, 16. The genesis of its illustrations is somewhat unclear. For differing opinions, see A. von Oechelhaeuser, *Die Miniaturen der Universitäts-Bibliothek zu Heidelberg*, Heidelberg 1887, 1, esp. pp. 75-83) and C. Hand Kessler, *A Problematic Illumination of the Heidelberg Liber Scivias*, in *Marsyas*, VIII, 1957-59, pp. 7-21. For further information on the illustrations of the *Liber Scivias*, see L. Baillet *Les miniatures du Scivias de Sainte Hildegarde conservé à la Bibliothèque de Wiesbaden* in *Monuments et Mémoires publiés par l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres. Fondation Eugène Piot*, XIX, 1911, pp. 49-149 and C. Meier, *Zum Verhältnis von Text und Illustration im überlieferten Werk Hildegards von Bingen* in *Hildegard von Bingen. 1179-1979. Festschrift zum 800. Todestag der Heiligen*, ed. A. Ph. Brück, Mainz 1979, pp. 159-169.

14. Cited from Dronke, Appendix A, pp. 161-162 (Vatican, Bibl. Apostolica, Pal. lat. 311, fol. 12va). English translation taken from *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

15. Wiesbaden, Hessischen Landesbibl., Ms. 1, fol 14r.

Moon accompanied by a number of 'bright spheres' or additional stars. This shell, in turn, encloses a whitish sphere of watery air; more winds; and finally, the central, sandy terrestrial sphere.

The first miniature in the Heidelberg Codex contains a schematic rendering of the Six Days of Creation [fig. 2].¹⁶ The relationship between this image and the text of the *Liber Scivias* is less clear than in the Wiesbaden manuscript.¹⁷ But the inclusion of an egg-shaped universe to illustrate the First Day of Creation supports the thesis that this miniature either alludes to or has been informed by the text of Hildegard's third Vision.

The final example of an egg-shaped universe appears in a manuscript intimately related to Hildegard and her *Liber Scivias*, the mid-twelfth century *Chorbuch für die Prim* in Stuttgart [fig. 3].¹⁸ Save the inverted format and the arrangement of the Creation-roundels themselves the structure of this miniature is virtually identical to that in the Heidelberg Codex. The egg-shaped universe is located within the roundel depicting the First Day of Creation. Both First-Day roundels bear identical labels: '*Dies primus. Caelum et terram et lux, id est angeli*'. Whatever the exact relation between these two manuscripts, there is certainly the connection being made in both between an egg-shaped universe and the First Day of Creation.

One of the most striking elements of Hildegard's Vision is what Peter Dronke has called its 'turbulent drama of the cosmic processes'.¹⁹ Hildegard sees the universe as chaos held in check only by means of the hierarchy of its structure. Even in its completed state, Hildegard's universe is full of tempests, tumults, sharp stones, firey blasts and rage. The myth of

16. Heidelberg, Universitäts-Bibl., Salem x, 16, fol. 2r.

17. Oechelhaeuser dismisses the illumination as a poor illustration of the second Vision of Book 1, where Hildegard describes the Fall of Lucifer and the Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise (as in note 13, p. 77). Hand Kessler interprets it as a conflation of three separate visions: the Fall of Adam (Book 1, Vision 1), the Redeemer (Book 11, Vision 1) and the Choir of Angels (Book 1, Vision 6) (as in note 7, pp. 12-21).

18. Stuttgart, Württ. Landesbibl., Cod. hist. 2° 415, fol. 17r. The connection between these two illustrations was made first by Oechelhaeuser (as in note 13), p. 77. See also, K. Löffler, *Schwäbische Buchmalerei in romanischer Zeit*, Augsburg 1928, pp. 40-61; K. Löffler, *Die Handschriften der Klosters Zwiefalten*, Linz am Donau 1931, pp. 58-59 and J. Zahltern, 'Creatio mundi': *Darstellungen der sechs Schöpfungstage und naturwissenschaftliches Weltbild im Mittelalter*, Stuttgart 1979, pp. 84 and 149.

19. Dronke, p. 97.

'Orphic' Chaos may be lacking in its entirety, but it is certainly there in spirit. One senses that Hildegard's tentative resolution of primordial chaos into an egg-shaped universe must have been based on some version of the 'Orphic' cosmogonic fable.

The strangeness of these three images suggests that they are probably the product of a particular time and place – the invention of a mind imbued with that peculiar blend of mysticism and scholasticism characteristic of the mid-twelfth century and unique to Hildegard and her immediate environment. It seems reasonable to assume that the appearance of the 'cosmic egg' in religious art is an isolated and short-lived phenomenon and that any subsequent examples of eggs found in religious painting – such as in Piero della Francesca's *Brera Altarpiece* [fig. 4]²⁰ or in Mantegna's *San Zeno Altarpiece* [fig. 5]; Butinone's *Madonna and Child with SS John the Baptist and Giustina* in Isolabella or Gian Pietro da Cemmo's *Annunciate Virgin* in the Church of San Rocco in Bagolino [figs. 6 and 7]; Carpaccio's rendering of Sant'Antonio di Castello in his *Appari-*

20. Most art historians will be familiar with the long-running scholarly debate over the identification and significance of 'Piero's Egg'. Along with the markedly more vituperative exchange over certain aspects of the iconography of Mantegna's *Parnassus*, it remains a classic example of the academic serial monologue. Bibliography on the iconography of 'Piero's Egg' is as follows: A. Lisini, *Notizia di Duccio pittore*, in *Bollettino senese di Storia Patria*, v, 1889, p. 37; C. Gilbert, *On Subject and Non-Subject in Italian Renaissance Pictures*, in *The Art Bulletin*, xxxiv, 1952, pp. 202-16, esp. pp. 209-11; C. Gilbert, *Letter to the Editor*, in *The Art Bulletin*, xxxv, 1953, pp. 329-330; A. Levi d'Ancona, *Letter to the Editor*, in *The Art Bulletin*, xxxv, no. 4, 1953, p. 329; C. Marinisco, *Échos byzantins dans l'oeuvre de Piero della Francesca*, in *Bulletin de la Société Nationale des Antiquaires de France*, 1958, pp. 192-203; M. Meiss, 'Ovum struthionis'. *Symbol and Allusion in Piero della Francesca's Montefeltro Altarpiece*, in *Studies in Art and Literature for Belle da Costa Greene*, ed D. Miner, Princeton 1954, pp. 92-101; B. Widmer, *Eine Geschichte des Physiologus auf einem Madonnenbild der Brera* in *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, xv, 1963, no. 4, pp. 312-330; M. Meiss 'Addendum ovologicum', in *The Art Bulletin*, xxxvi, 1954, pp. 221-22; M. Meiss and T. Jones, *Once Again Piero della Francesca's Montefeltro Altarpiece*, in *The Art Bulletin*, xlvi, 1966, pp. 203-206; M.A. Lavin, in *Piero della Francesca's Montefeltro Altarpiece: A Pledge of Fidelity*, in *The Art Bulletin*, li, 1969, pp. 367-371; E. Battisti, *Piero della Francesca*, Milan 1971, I, pp. 330-355, esp. p. 337, and 513-516, I. Ragusa, 'The Egg Reopened', in *The Art Bulletin*, liii, 1971, pp. 435-443; C. Gilbert, in *The Egg Reopened Again*, in *The Art Bulletin*, lvi, 1974, pp. 252-258; M. Meiss, *Not an Ostrich Egg*, in *The Art Bulletin*, lvii, 1975, p. 116; M.D. Davis, *Piero della Francesca's Mathematical Treatises: The Trattato d'abaco and Libellus de quinque corporibus regularibus*, Ravenna 1977, p. 95, n. 63; D.W. Brisson, *Piero della Francesca's Egg Again*, in *The Art Bulletin*, lxii, 1980, pp. 284-286 and M.D. Davis, *Carpaccio and the Perspective of Regular Bodies* in *La prospettiva rinascimentale. Codificazioni e trasgressioni*, ed. M. Dalai Emiliani, Florence 1980, I, pp. 183-200, esp. pp. 197 and 200, n. 79.

tion of the *Ten Thousand Martyrs* in the Accademia [fig. 8]; Lotto's predella panel of *St. Lucy before the Tomb of Sant'Agatha* in Jesi, or in Lorenzo Costa's *St Jerome* in the Bolognese Church of San Petronio [fig.s 9 and 10] – do not refer to this tradition.

Surprisingly, however, there is one fifteenth-century painting containing an egg-shaped object which does merit closer examination. In the Pinacoteca Comunale of Bologna, there is a large panel depicting the *Virgin adoring the Child flanked by SS Bernardino and Anthony Abbot and two Angels* [fig.s 11 and 12].²¹ The artist of the painting is unknown. Attributions vary between a Florentine and Paduan/Emilian provenance.²² The painting can be roughly dated due to the inclusion of two familial *stemmata* on the bases of the *pilastrini*: the Sforza impresa of the 'onde' quartered with the Bentivoglio 'sega'. The altarpiece may have been commissioned to commemorate the marriage of Ginevra Sforza and Giovanni II Bentivoglio in 1465.

For our purposes, it is interesting to note that a large egg-shaped object hangs above the head of the Virgin. The object is encased by bands of decorative metallic filigree work, suggesting that the visual model for the image was one of the over-sized bird's eggs commonly displayed in

21. See F. Filippini, *La collezione dei quadri del Museo Civico di Bologna*, in *Comune di Bologna*, x, no. 4, 1932, pp. 32-39; G. Zucchini, *Catalogo delle collezioni comunali d'arte di Bologna*, Bologna 1938, pp. 86-89 and M. Medica's entry in *Collezioni comunali d'arte. L'appartamento del Legato in Palazzo d'Accursio*, Bologna 1989, p. 38, no. 28. Corinna Giudici has recently discovered an eighteenth-century document in the Archivio del Convento dell'Osservanza in Bologna, which refers to an 'ancona antica ... dov'è dipinta l'immagine di Maria Vergine, del Bambino Gesù, di S. Antonio Abate', which is described as formerly located in the Choir of the Convent, but 'fu trasportata nell'atrio della Sagrestia'. See *L'Osservanza nell'arte Bolognese. Studi in occasione del decennio di restauri di opere d'arte nel Convento e nella Chiesa dell'Osservanza a Bologna*, Bologna 1989, p. 33. I thank Dott.ssa Giudici for bringing this publication to my attention. Luisa Ciammitti is currently preparing a study on the *Pala* and its relation to another important fifteenth-century Osservanza commission, Francesco del Cossa's *Annunciation* in Dresden.

22. Filippini (as in note 21), pp. 28-29 attributes the painting to the Florentine Zanobi del Migliore, 'socio' of Pesellino, Filippo Lippi and Piero di Lorenzo. Zanobi moved to Bologna in 1459, enrolled in the 'Matricola delle Quattro Arti' in 1461 and received a commission to paint frescoes in the apse of San Petronio in 1464. No secure works have survived. Filippini repeated this attribution in *Notizie di Pittori fiorentini a Bologna nel Quattrocento* in *Miscellanea di Storia dell'Arte in onore di Igino Benvenuto Supino*, Florence 1933, pp. 419-28. Zucchini (as in note 21, p. 89) tentatively attributed the painting to Zoppo's student, Tommaso Garelli; and Medica (as in note 21, p. 38) proposes an attribution to the Bolognese school, second half of the fifteenth century.

churches as a testimony to the marvels of nature. An inscription running between the Virgin's mouth and the head of the Christ Child reads: '*O chaos magnum inclite celsitudinis fili mi quis tua[m] digne valebit precelsam speciem contemplari?*' [fig. 11].²³ Essentially, the Virgin is invoking Chaos – her Son – and asking who will have the strength to contemplate his heavenly form with dignity.

This equation between Chaos and the Christ Child is, to my knowledge, unique. It is a combination of images one does not expect, since in most Latin and Greek sources, 'Chaos' is defined in negative terms – as confusion, the great abyss, shadowy evil, and even as being like Hell. Essentially, the disorder of Chaos is most often seen as the opposite of the order of the created universe, or the 'cosmos' of creation.²⁴

There is, however, an apparently limited, yet tenacious tradition in which Chaos is not seen as an evil or dangerous disorder. As Clement of Alexandria had mentioned, both Homer and Hesiod refer to Chaos as the first created essence. Christian writers developed this idea by stating that Chaos was the first substance created by God. Chaos itself was created *ex nihilo* and is formless, yet having been created, it contains the potential for generated form. For example, St. Augustine defines Chaos as being 'unformed material which, although it is made from nothing, nevertheless exists and has the capacity of species and form'.²⁵ In short, Chaos is seen as the link between 'nothingness' and 'form'.

Not surprisingly, this formulation of Chaos proved to be rather influential in certain scientific circles, especially amongst those scientists concerned with physics. One of the problems that concerned medieval scientists – from the alchemist to the philosopher – was how causes were transformed into primary matter and how, in turn, the primary matter of

23. The final word of the inscription is difficult to read due to the poor condition of the painting, but '*contemplari?*' seems to be indicated. I wish to thank Dott.ssa Carla Bernardini, Curator at the Museo Civico Medievale di Bologna, and her staff for their generosity in allowing me to examine the painting despite the current remodelling of the galleries in the Palazzo Comunale.

24. See, for example, the definitions and citations in the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, Leipzig 1907, III, pp. 990-91 and J. Ternus, *Chaos*, in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum...*, ed. T. Klauser, Stuttgart 1954, II, cols. 1032-40.

25. S. Augustine, *De genesi contra manichaeos*, 1.5.9: '*Primo ergo materia facta est confusa et informis, unde omnia fierent quae distincta atque formata sunt, quod credo a Graecis chaos appellari?*' (Migne, *PL*, xxxiv, 178, ll. 8-11).

the universe was then transformed into the different elements – earth, air, water and fire. Many theorists assumed that there must be some sort of flux, to coax along this change from one state into another. Since different species cannot generate each other – a man cannot be born from a chicken, for example – then this flux, or agent, must contain within it all the possible permutations of matter. Or, ideally, it might be some substance that was ‘pre-matter’. The obvious solution was that Chaos was somehow responsible for the generation of differentiated matter.

To cite two examples, the thirteenth-century Mallorcan monk, Ramon Lull, wrote a rather lengthy treatise sometime between 1275 and 1281 entitled the *Liber Chaos*.²⁶ In this treatise, he addresses a number of complex issues regarding the specific role that Chaos plays in the generation of species. For Lull, Chaos is a universal. It is an undefined mass which contains the essences of the four elements – ‘earthiness’, ‘airiness’, ‘wateriness’ and ‘fieriness’.²⁷ That is, Chaos contains the propensity towards qualities. Lull defines these essences as operations of the Spirit proceeding directly from the virtues of the Son of God.²⁸ In one extremely contorted passage, Lull argues that Chaos must play a role in the development of matter prior to the embodiment of the rational Soul. If it did not, he says, then there might be a difference between how Chaos entered a rational egg and an irrational egg – the ‘rational egg’ being something that was created out of like matter (such as flesh out of flesh) and the ‘irrational egg’ as being something created out of unlike matter. He cites the fact that the Incarnation of Christ depended on the mixing of two unlike essences – divine and human – to prove his point.²⁹

It is a peculiar formulation, yet Lull’s ideas seem to have found a sympathetic reception with later scientists also concerned with the transition between essence and form. In the sixteenth century, for example, Paracelsus proposed a nearly identical role for Chaos in the formation of

26. The *Liber Chaos* is edited in *Beati Raymundi Lulli doctoris illuminati et martyris operum*, Mainz 1721-42, III (1722), section v, pp. 55. Reprinted Frankfurt a.M. 1965, III, pp. 249-292. The most convenient overview of the book is found in F. Yates, pp. 1-44, esp. pp. 18-25.

27. *Liber Chaos*, Mainz 1722, III, p. 1/Frankfurt 1965, III, p. 249: ‘*Essentiam chaos in quatuor partes divisam esse intelligimus, scilicet in igneitatē, aëritatem, aqueitatem, et territatem*’. Cited by Yates, p. 19, n. 81.

28. Yates, p. 25.

29. Lull, *Liber Chaos*, Mainz 1722, III, p. 9/Frankfurt 1965, III, p. 257.

matter.³⁰ The virtues and forces contained within natural objects are defined as the uncreated emanations which come directly from God. The stuff upon which these emanations work – the transitory medium in a volatile state – is Chaos.³¹ Paracelsus's Chaos comprises the defining qualities of matter, or, as he phrases it, Chaos is the mother-element, the habitat in which all things come into being.³² Arguing metaphorically, he describes Chaos as being like air. Generative Chaos surrounds each living being in the same way that air surrounds each human being. It is the stuff which enlivens and sustains us. Furthermore, Chaos surrounds the earth just as the white of an egg surrounds the yolk, both protecting it and nurturing it.³³

This idea of the created earth being a nurtured embryo recalls the passage from the *Periphyseon* of John Scot Eriugena, in which Eriugena describes the Creation of the World as the Holy Spirit nourishing the fermentation of Divine Love – with Divine Love defined as those primordial causes which God the Father had made in the beginning in his Son. Eriugena says that the primordial causes are fermented by the Holy Spirit in the same way that eggs are fermented by birds – the idea being that the inward invisible power of the parent lies latent within both the egg and within the primordial causes embodied by Jesus Christ.³⁴

30. See Pagel, 1960, pp. 125-160 and *idem*, 1962, pp. 49-53, 98-105 and 120-136. I thank Christoph Geismar for suggesting this avenue of research.

31. See Pagel, 1960, pp. 161-162 and Pagel, 1962, pp. 49-50.

32. See Pagel, 1960, pp. 144-145 and 161-163 and Pagel, 1962, pp. 98-99 and 121-123.

33. See, in particular, the passage in Paracelsus, *Saemtliche Werke [XIII, 1. Abteilung. Medizinische naturwissenschaftliche und philiosophische Schriften]*, ed. K. Sudhoff, Munich and Berlin 1931, section x, pp. 16-17. See also Pagel, 1960, pp. 161-162.

34. *Ioannis Scotti Eriugena Periphyseon (De divisione naturae)*, II, 19: 'Spiritus enim sanctus causas primordiales, quas Pater in principio, in Filio videlicet suo fecerat, ut in ea, quorum causae sunt, procederent, fovebat, hoc est, divini amoris fotu nutribat. Ad hoc nanque ova ab alitibus, ex quibus haec metafora assumpta est, fovetur, ut intima invisibilisque vis seminum, quae in eis latet, per numeros locorum temporumque in formas visibiles corporalesque pulchritudines igne aereque in humoribus seminum terrenaque materia operantibus erumpat (For the Holy Spirit fermented, that is, nourished in the fermentation of the Divine Love, the primordial causes which the Father had made in the Beginning, that is, in His Son, so that they might proceed into those things of which they are the causes. For to this end are eggs fermented by birds, from whom this metaphor is drawn, that the inward invisible power of the seeds which is latent in them may break forth through the individuation of places and times into visible forms and corporeal beauties by the operation of fire and air upon the humours and the earthly matter of the seeds). Ed. and English transl. I.P. Sheldon-Williams, (*Scriptores latini*

I have cited three passages dating from the ninth, thirteenth and sixteenth centuries in which images of Chaos, the egg and the Incarnation of Christ are used to help explain how the world was created and how matter is generated out of formlessness. Both Frances Yates and Walter Pagel have suggested that the reappearance of similar analogies in Clement, Hildegard, Eriugena, Lull and Paracelsus prove a continued, unbroken tradition of neo-Platonic influence in Christian writings on the Creation of the Universe.³⁵ If this were true, then the Bologna altarpiece would be just one added step in this progression. I would argue the case slightly differently. Save the likely dependence of Paracelsus on Lull's *Liber Chaos*, few of these Creation *formulae* are identical. Instead, each differs slightly in presentation and argument. It seems, then, that there probably is not a direct link running from one author to another, but that the sorts of ideas we see appearing in the different authors reflect ideas that were commonly available, yet not fully formulated. To adopt an analogy, these ideas were present in a sort of intellectual Chaos – unformed, but capable of generating form.

The significance of the iconography of the Bologna altarpiece is not absolutely clear. The source of the quotation has not yet been discovered. Nevertheless, it seems safe to assume that one aspect of the picture is somehow related to this mixture of ideas about the formation of matter, the exceptional circumstances of the Incarnation of Christ and the difference between creation and generation. In the passages cited, Christ is often referred to as the source of uncreated essences. He is uncreated because He is part of the Triune Creator of all Things.³⁶ In becoming flesh, however, Christ takes on material form. Therefore, His flesh *is* created. In equating the Christ Child with Chaos, I assume that the originator of

hiberniae, VII, IX and X), Dublin 1968-82, *Liber secundus* (ix, 1972), pp. 66-67. Also cited by Dronke, pp. 156-157).

35. See nn. 26-33 above.

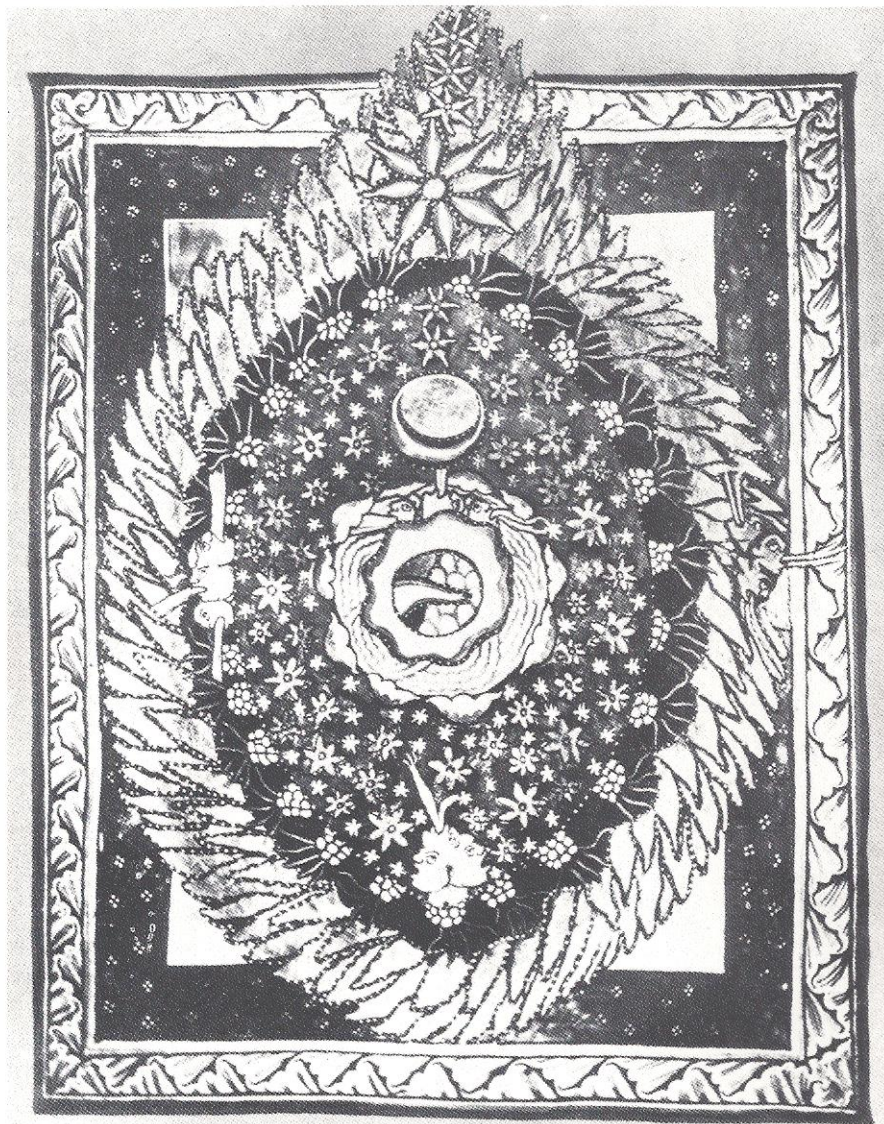
36. The Trinitarian theme of the painting is highlighted by the fact that God the Father holds a tablet bearing the inscription '*Ego sum lux mundi*' in the central gable of the frame [Plate II]. I thank Prof Sir E.H. Gombrich for bringing this aspect of the altarpiece to my attention. The well-known phrase appears twice in the *Bible* (John 8:12 and 9:5), both times specifically describing Christ Incarnate. It is interesting to note, with reference to the present argument, however, that the latter passage adds an important qualifier: '*Quamdiu sum in mundo, lux sum mundi* (As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world)'.

the quotation in the Bologna altarpiece is claiming that the Incarnated Christ, like Chaos, is God's creation and that he is not generated by some intermediary agent. Christ is also, like Chaos, self-forming because he contains within himself those virtues and powers which can generate the matter of his human form.

Until the exact source of the Virgin's invocation is discovered, the exact significance of this grouping of images will remain somewhat mysterious. It also seems possible, however, that even if the source of the quotation is discovered, the intended message of the painting may still escape us. What does seem clear, though, is the extent to which our understanding of a painting can be enhanced through the addition of a text. Whereas one will never be sure if other north Italian paintings that contain eggs, such as Piero's *Brera Altarpiece*, were painted with similar theological and philosophical arguments in mind, we can be relatively certain that the different iconographic elements in the Bologna altarpiece point toward its interpretation as an extended commentary on the nature of Christ's Incarnation.

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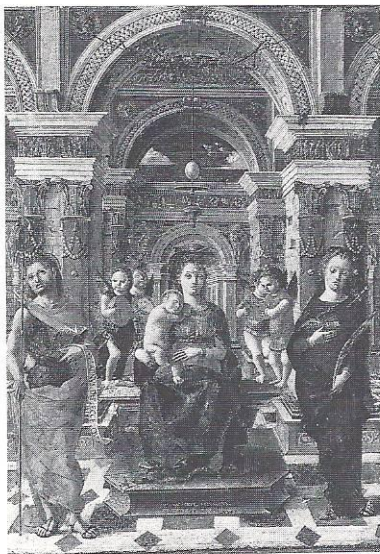
1. Wiesbaden, Hessischen Landesbibliothek, Ms. 1, fol. 14r. Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*.



4. Piero della Francesca, *The Brera Altarpiece*, Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera.



5. Andrea Mantegna, *San Zeno Altarpiece*, San Zeno, Verona. Detail, central panel.



6. Bernardino Butinone, *Madonna and Child with SS. John the Baptist and Giustina*, Isola Bella, Palazzo Borromeo.



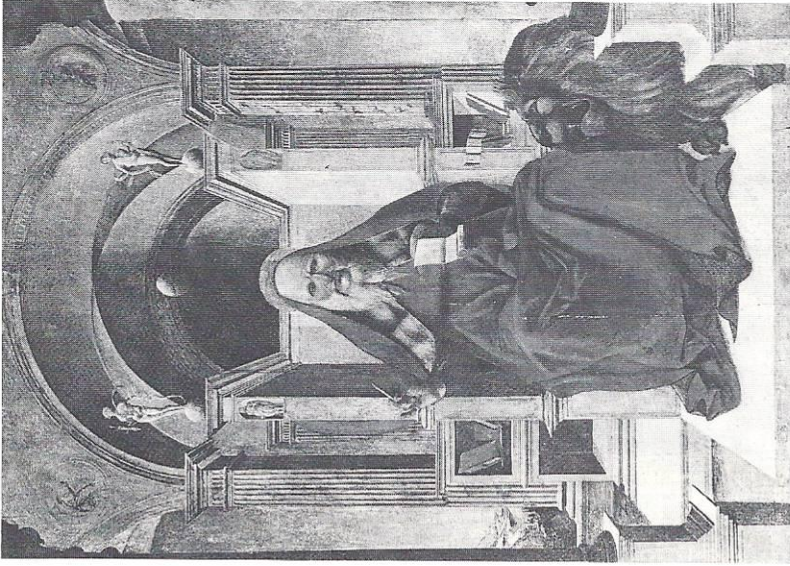
7. Gian Pietro da Cemmo, *Annunciate Virgin*, San Rocco, Bagolino.



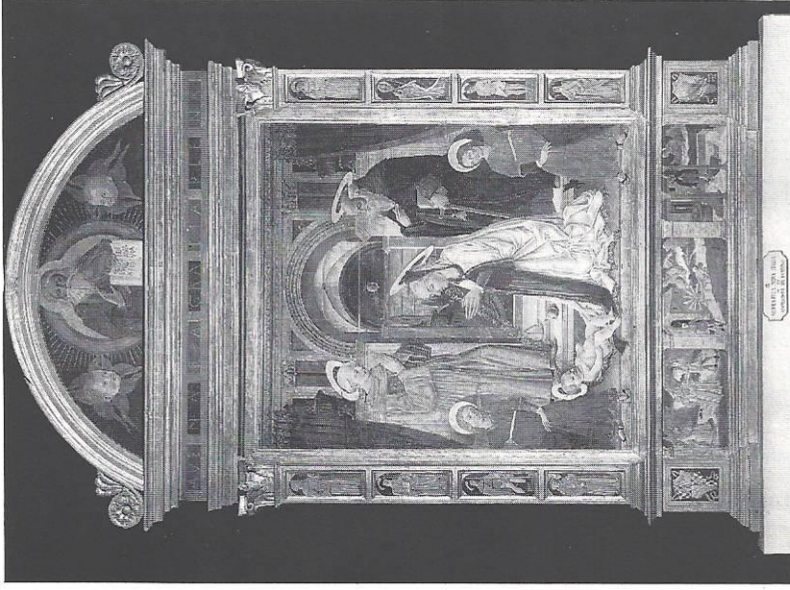
8. Vittore Carpaccio, *The Apparition of the Ten Thousand Martyrs*, Venice, Galleria dell'Accademia.



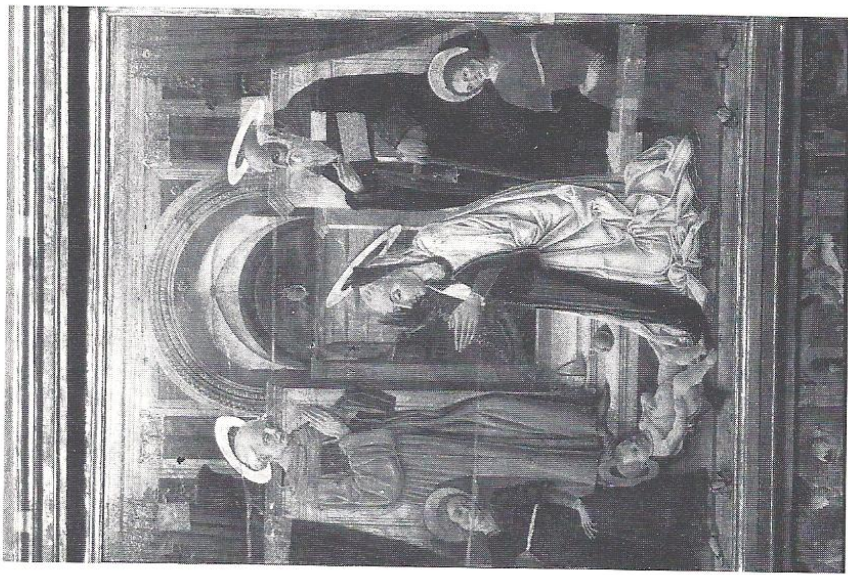
9. Lorenzo Lotto, *St. Lucy before the Tomb of Sant'Agatha* (predella panel from the *Pala di Santa Lucia*), Jesi, Pinacoteca Civica.



10. Lorenzo Costa, *St. Jerome*, Bologna, San Petronio.



11. Anonymous Emilian Artist, *Virgin adoring the Child flanked by SS. Bernardino and Anthony Abbot and Tivo Angels*, Bologna, Collezioni Comunali d'Arte.



12. Anonymous Emilian Artist, *Virgin adoring the Child flanked by SS Bernardino and Anthony Abbot and Two Angels*, Bologna, Collezioni Comunali d'Arte, detail of central panel.



13. Anonymous Emilian Artist, *Virgin adoring the Child flanked by SS Bernardino and Anthony Abbot and Two Angels*, Bologna, Collezioni Comunali d'Arte, detail of the inscription.