ABSTRACTION AND INEFFABILITY IN THE CENTRAL MIDDLE AGES. VISUAL CULTURE AND THE INTERSUBJECTIVE APOPHATIC IMAGINATION: A FIRST APPROACH

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ABSTRACCIÓN E INEFABILIDAD EN LA EDAD MEDIA CENTRAL CULTURA VISUAL E IMAGINACIÓN APOFÁTICA INTERSUBJETIVA: UNA PRIMERA APROXIMACIÓN

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ABSTRACT

Abstract and quasi-abstract motifs were widely used in the religious images of the central Middle Ages. In many cases, these were certainly not simple ornamental devices but, on the contrary, they functioned as cognitively challenging semiotic devices affected by complex theological ideas. As this article will suggest, the miniatures discussed here — produced in the Byzantine, Insular, Carolingian, and Ottonian contexts — were created in accordance with apophatic spirituality, using nonfigurative representation to emphasise God's ineffability. Thus, visual culture from the late seventh to the early eleventh century established an intricate transregional network in which iconic and symbolic contents were communicated rhizomatically. This phenomenon will be described here as the *intersubjective apophatic imagination*. The aim of this notion is to reflect the influence of important authors, whether closely or distantly associated with the *via negativa*, such as Pseudo Dionysius Areopagita, Kosmas Indikopleustes, Bede, and Ioannes Scotus Eriugena. Taking these elements into account, the article will argue that the aesthetic and semantic singularities of the images in question would have sought to avoid the *presentification of meaning* as a way of capturing the incomprehensibility of the divine essence.

Keywords: abstraction / visual culture / ineffability / apophatic theology / central Middle Ages / rhizome

RESUMEN

Motivos abstractos y cuasi-abstractos fueron vastamente utilizados en las imágenes religiosas de la Edad Media central. En muchos casos, ciertamente, no se trató de simples recursos ornamentales, sino que, por el contrario, funcionaron como dispositivos semióticos cognitivamente desafiantes afectados por complejas ideas teológicas. Como será sugerido, las miniaturas discutidas en el presente artículo —producidas en los contextos bizantino, insular, carolingio y otónida— fueron modeladas a partir de la espiritualidad apofática, empleando representaciones no figurativas para enfatizar la inefabilidad de Dios. Así, la cultura visual desde finales del siglo VII hasta principios del XI estableció una intrincada red transregional en la que se comunicaron rizomáticamente contenidos icónicos y simbólicos. Este fenómeno será descrito aquí como *imaginación apofática intersubjetiva*. El propósito de esta noción es reflejar la influencia de importantes autores, ya sea fuerte o levemente asociados con la *via negativa*, tales como Pseudo Dionisio Areopagita, Cosmas Indicopleustes, Beda y Juan Escoto Eriúgena. Tomando en consideración estos elementos, se argumentará que las singularidades estéticas y semánticas de las imágenes en cuestión habrían buscado evitar la *presentificación del sentido* como una forma de capturar la incomprensibilidad de la esencia divina.

Palabras claves: abstracción / cultura visual / inefabilidad / teología apofática / Edad Media central / rizoma

Introduction[1]

To see Andreas Gursky's (German *1955) massive photographs is to feel subsumed by the image itself. The experience of the overwhelming constructed by the artist makes the beholder confront the blurred limits of the visible and the invisible. Among his programmatic and most celebrated shots, Paris, Montparnasse (1993)[2] exemplifies the artist's distinctive tension between the figurative and the nonfigurative, the intelligible and the unintelligible. The picture captures the *immeuble* Mouchotte, designed by the French architect Jean Dubuisson (1914-2011) and delivered in 1966[3]. By splicing two photographs through digital manipulation, the monumental image shows an imposing reticulated, long façade with an array of windows that seems to encapsulate different colours and textures within[4]. The rigid composition, which exceeds the lateral margins of the picture, is populated by everchanging details which are offered to the onlooker from a pronounced distance and without a univocal viewpoint. As Bence Nanay maintained in his persuasive essay, though, what Gursky actually did was to develop an abstract design, reusing some elements in order to present them under the disguise of multiplicity:

> [...] in *Paris, Montparnasse*, we see a large apartment building
> with several hundred windows. If we look at the photo
> from afar, we see the windows arranged, like pixels, in an

2 London, Tate, Ref. P77737. Photograph, colour, on paper between glass and Perspex, image: 1342 × 3190 mm; support: 1800 × 3500 mm; frame: 1875 × 3550 × 65 mm.

3 P. CAILLOT – G. MONNIER. "Le « village Mouchotte » à Paris : acteurs et militants de la modernité urbaine" in X. GUILLOT (ed.) *Habiter la modernité : actes du colloque « Vivre au 3e millénaire dans un immeuble emblématique de la modernité ».* Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne: Saint-Étienne, 2006, pp. 55-74, p. 58.

4 P. GALASSI. *Andreas Gursky*. The Museum of Modern Art; H.N. Abrams: New York (NY), 2001, p. 38; H. CAMPBELL, "The Façade Fills the Frame: The Uses and Meanings of the Elevational View" in *The Journal of Architecture.* 21/6 (2016), pp. 860-872, p. 869.

interesting, abstract geometrical pattern. But if we walk close to the print, what we see in these windows is carefully arranged with the help of digital manipulation: we often see the same pieces of furniture or the same curtain in different windows, for example[5].

At the same time, the puzzling relationship between the photograph's colossal scale and its tiny details assaults the observer with a contemporary interpretation of the sublime. Abstraction arises at this point as a crucial feature: insignificant human presence, explicit or implicit, is reduced to a ceaseless and unsettling design. The sublime in the light of this picture poses epistemological and theological questions but in a postmodern key, inasmuch as globalisation has taken the place of *a god whose powers are beyond human understanding*[6]. This is clearly an example of how abstraction entails epistemological issues. Gursky's visual density produces no other effect than the obliteration of visuality itself. With this process, the photographer creates an obstacle for decoding meaning in a transparent, immediate or unambiguous manner.

This aesthetic and epistemic strategy was already present in the visual culture of the Middle Ages[7]. If I may use a modern denomination, abstraction, nonetheless, poses major challenges for an up-to-date signification of those medieval artefacts[8]. How did the inhabitants of the central Middle Ages — depending on their race, gender, and social status — see and understand those abstruse forms, displays of colours, and designs? How profound was their comprehension of the current theological trends that might have informed the creation of such images? How effective was abstraction for the purposes of "negating" presence within a logocentric religious milieu, as the Christian doctrine proves it to be? Ultimately, is it possible to reconstruct a foundational meaning or, at least, an aesthetical intention of sorts behind such pictures?[9]

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5 B. NANAY, "The Macro and the Micro: Andreas Gursky's Aesthetics" in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. 70/1 (2012), pp. 91-100, p. 96. Available in https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6245.2011.01501.x.

6 A. OHLIN, "Andreas Gursky and the Contemporary Sublime" in *Art Journal*. 61/4 (2002), pp. 22-35, p. 24. Available in https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2002.10792133.

7 On this subject see E. GERTSMAN (ed.) *Abstraction in Medieval Art: Beyond the Ornament*. Amsterdam University Press: Amsterdam, 2021.

8 It is essential to be mindful of Hans Belting's seminal argument on the nature of the images created during the Middle Ages, that is to say, before "art" as a modern device with particular epistemic and cognitive implications; see H. BELTING. *Bild und Kult: eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*. Beck: München, 1991.

9 Highly pertinent questions regarding this matter are raised in Elina Gertsman's preface to her recently edited volume on medieval abstraction; see E. GERTSMAN. "Preface: Withdrawal and Presence" in E. GERTSMAN (ed.) *Abstraction in Medieval Art*..., pp. 17-29, pp. 20-21.

Certainly there are extremely complicated cognitive issues at the base of the problems addressed here, without mentioning the specific historiographic barriers in the case. Trying to take these difficulties into account, in this paper I will discuss medieval abstraction while examining diverse images in illuminated manuscripts and the potential influence of apophatic theology on them.

Visual Culture and the Intersubjective Apophatic Imagination

In order to describe the communication of ideological and iconographic constructs in the central Middle Ages, an organic and hierarchical approach seems deficient inasmuch as it simplifies the complexity of the issue analysed here. Instead, a rhizomatic model[10] could be more adequate for pondering the multidimensional connections between the Latin West, the Greek East, and the Semitic milieu. As a matter of fact, transversal historical relations can be traced associating these civilisation's attitudes towards representation. "The long eighth century", that is to say, between ca. 680 and ca. 830 as Leslie Brubaker has affirmed, was exceptionally intense with regard to the legitimacy and function of religious images[11]. In the Mediterranean, the phenomenon was framed by the agency of the Islamic caliphates and the Byzantine empire, whose spiritual and political concerns had them questioning the appropriateness of visually representing divinity.

After Mohammed's death in 632, Islamic power started to expand, extending by the mid-eighth century throughout the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant, Mesopotamia, the Indus valley, the Maghreb, and most of the Iberian Peninsula[12]. During those convulsed years, the sacredness of pictures and the dangers of idolatry were among the issues discussed by Muslim intellectuals. Nevertheless, the response of the Islamic world to the conflict was far from being as homogeneous and sturdily enunciated as in Eastern Christendom, where the then contemporary iconoclastic controversy demanded compelling and robust theological

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10 For the concept of "rhizome" see G. DELEUZE – F. GUATTARI. *Mille plateaux : capitalisme et schizophrénie*. Minuit: Paris, 1980.

11 L. BRUBAKER, "Representation c. 800: Arab, Byzantine, Carolingian" in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society. 6/19* (2009), pp. 37-55. Available in https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440109999003X.

12 L. BRUBAKER, "Representation..." pp. 37-38. See also D. SOURDEL. *L'Islam médiéval*. Presses universitaires de France: Paris, 1979; A. WINK. *Al- Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World, 1. Early Medieval India and the Expansion of Islam: 7th-11th Centuries*. Brill: Leiden; Boston (MA), 2002; P. SARRIS. *Empires of Faith: The Fall of Rome to the Rise of Islam, 500-700*. Oxford University Press: Oxford; New York (NY), 2011; T. ZADEH. *Mapping Frontiers Across Medieval Islam: Geography, Translation, and the 'Abbāsid Empire*. I.B. Tauris: London; New York (NY), 2011.

arguments from iconoclasts and iconodules alike. Different specialists have described this relevant distinction[13], explaining that "Islam (or Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religious traditions) lacks such an articulate theology or philosophy of the visual image because it has never been forced to marshal its defense in a sustained manner"[14].

On the other hand, the Byzantine disputes on icons that took place between ca. 724 and 843 were much more ambitious in theological and political terms[15]. It is worth mentioning that Jewish and Islamic viewpoints on representation, surely with different emphasis, played a role in this controversy. In the West, however, visuality remained more or less stable with the significant exception of the Carolingian response to the Second Council of Nicaea of 787 and their restitution of the veneration of images. Alcuinus [Alcuin of York] (ca. 735-804), who was one of the most prominent intellectuals in the Carolingian court and Charlemagne's (ca. 747-814) closest adviser, wrote a brief document about the issue which no longer survives, while another leading scholar

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13 E. C. DODD. "The Image of the Word: Notes of the Religious Iconography of Islam" in E. R. HOFFMAN (ed.) *Late Antique and Medieval Art of the Mediterranean World*. Blackwell: Malden (MA); Oxford, 2007, pp. 185-212, pp. 192ff; G. R. D. KING. "Islam, Iconoclasm, and the Declaration of Doctrine" in E. R. HOFFMAN (ed.) *Late Antique and Medieval Art...*, pp. 213-226, pp. 214ff; L. BRUBAKER, "Representation..." pp. 38ff; J. J. ELIAS. *Aisha's Cushion: Religious Art, Perception, and Practice in Islam*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge (MA), 2012, p. 57ff; H. C. EVANS. "Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition (7th-9th Century)" in H. C. EVANS – B. RATLIFF (ed.) *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition, 7th-9th Century*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art: New York (NY), 2012, pp. 4-10, pp. 9-10.

14 J. J. ELIAS. *Aisha's Cushion...*, pp. 60-61.

15 The bibliography on the subject is immense. Among others see A. GRABAR. *L'iconoclasme byzantin: dossier archeologique*. College de France: Paris, 1957; P. J. ALEXANDER. *The Patriarch Nicephorus of Constantinople, Ecclesiastical Policy and Image Worship in the Byzantine Empire*. Clarendon: Oxford, 1958; several essays in F. BŒSPFLUG – N. LOSSKY (ed.). *Nicée II, 787-1987 : douze siècles d'images religieuses, actes du colloque international Nicée II tenu au Collège de France, Paris, les 2, 3, 4 octobre 1986*. Cerf: Paris, 1987; R. CORMACK. *Writing in Gold: Byzantine Society and its Icons*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1985; J. PELIKAN. *Imago Dei: The Byzantine Apologia for Icons*. Princeton University Press: Princeton (NJ), 1990; M. BARASCH. *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea*. New York University Press: New York (NY); London, 1992; H. GAUER. *Texte zum byzantinischen Bilderstreit: der Synodalbrief der drei Partriarchen des Ostens von 836 und seine Verwandlung in sieben Jahrhunderten*. Lang: Frankfurt am Main, 1994; M. J. MONDZAIN. *Image, icône, économie : les sources byzantines de l'imaginaire contemporain*. Seuil: Paris, 1996; K. PARRY. *Depicting the Word: Byzantine Iconophile thought of the Eighth and Ninth Centuries*. Brill: Leiden; New York (NY), 1996; A. BESANÇON. *L'image interdite : une histoire intellectuelle de l'iconoclasme*. Gallimard: Paris, 2000; L. BRUBAKER – J. HALDON (ed.). *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era* (ca. 680-850): *The Sources, An Annotated Survey*. Ashgate: Aldershot, 2001; C. BARBER. *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm*. Princeton University Press: Princeton (NJ), 2002; H. G. THÜMMEL. *Die Konzilien zur Bilderfrage im 8. und 9. Jahrhundert: das 7. Ökumenische Konzil von Nikaia 787*. L. BRUBAKER – J. HALDON. *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era*, c. 680-850: *A History*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2011; E. FOGLIADINI. *L'immagine negata: il Concilio di Hieria e la formalizzazione ecclesiale dell'iconoclasmo*. Jaca: Milano, 2013; L. BRUBAKER. *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm*. Bristol: London, 2012; E. FOGLIADINI. *L'invenzione dell'immagine sacra: la legittimazione ecclesiale dell'icona al secondo Concilio di Nicea*. Jaca: Milano, 2015; M. T. G. HUMPHREYS. *Law, Power, and Imperial Ideology in the Iconoclast Era*: c. 680-850. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2015.

and collaborator of the king, Theodulfus Aurelianensis [Theodulf of Orléans] (ca. 755-821), was in charge of composing the official reaction to the Council. The colossal treatise known as the *Opus Caroli Regis contra synodum*, in the past inaccurately called the *Libri Carolini*, was the most concerted Frankish argument against the Nicene unconditional support to the cult of images[16]. Likewise, following Pope Hadrian's (†795) negative reaction to the Carolingian position, and after some timid attempts to improve the dialogue with Rome, the Franks held a council of their own in Frankfurt in 794. On that occasion, they insisted on the condemnation of the Byzantine synod and its alleged resolution on worshipping holy icons in the same way as the divine Trinity — a misinterpretation of the Greek *acta* which is perhaps attributable to a poor Latin translation.

Beyond these diverse thoughts on the permissibility of images, the long eighth century was without any doubt a critical moment regarding the use of these religious artefacts in different societal contexts. These conflicts were indeed the conditions which made possible a dense network of reciprocal influences on this topic between Eastern and Western civilisations, whether decisive or not. These exchanges, of course, were both theoretical and concrete. Not for nothing there was a historiographic trend which tied Islamic, Byzantine, Insular, and Carolingian visualities together under the common label of *primitive art*[17]. Nowadays it is obvious that these sort of ethnoessentialist and classicist interpretations are not serious, but they hint at the existence of a rhizome that links the images of these societies in a deeper nexus. For this very reason it becomes impracticable to understand medieval visual culture using a reductionist consequentialist or teleological approach. It should be noticed that what arose at that historic moment is another piece of evidence that globalisation was a semiotic transterritorial experience which was much older than the recent phenomenon we commonly take into account[18].

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16 For an excellent overview of this subject see T. F. X. NOBLE. *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians*. University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia (PA), 2009, pp. 158-206.

17 This was the case of Henri Focillon, Władysław Tatarkiewicz, François Masai, and Ernst Kitzinger among many others. For a critical reading of this historiographic approach see M. SHAPIRO. *The Language of Forms: Lectures on Insular Manuscript Art*. The Pierpont Morgan Library: New York (NY), 2005, pp. 7-8, 55-56; R. S. NELSON. "Byzantine Art vs Western Medieval Art" in M. BALARD et al. (ed.) *Byzance et le monde extérieur : contacts, relations, échanges, actes de trois séances du XXe Congrès international des études byzantines, Paris, 19-25 août 2001*. Publications de la Sorbonne: Paris, 2005, pp. 255-270, p. 255; E. C. DODD. "The Image of the Word…"; L. NEES. "Ethnic and Primitive Paradigms in the Study of Early Medieval Art" in C. CHAZELLE – F. LIFSHITZ (ed.) *Paradigms and Methods in Early Medieval Studies*. Palgrave Macmillan: New York (NY); Basingstoke, 2007, pp. 41-60.

18 C. HOLMES – N. STANDEN, "Introduction: Towards a global middle ages". *Past & Present. 238/ no suppl_13* (2018), pp. 1-44. Available in https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gty030.

Thus, as these visual cultures were developing concurrently, rhizomatic connections could explain reciprocal stimuli that grew in multiple directions and with different intensities. Abstract or quasi-abstract ornamentation is one of these rhizomatic *lines of flight*, a Deleuzoguattarian concept which I will use to indicate the possible convergences or divergences which were unfolding between these socio-political and cultural regions[19]. One of the many facets of this multifaceted scene is intimately linked to the apophatic approach to the divine which was transversally cultivated in the East and the West. By apophaticism I allude to the philosophical and religious current patently initiated in Classical Antiquity[20] — for instance, by Xenophanes of Colophon[21], and continued to some extent a century later by Plato[22] — and also present in such contemporaneous texts as the Hebraic Scriptures[23]. I avoid using the notion *apophatic theology* since I am not necessarily considering systematic religious reflection. I am, rather, referring to negative strategies for addressing the Godhead within the broader frame of spiritual speculation. Nonetheless, to a great extent, in the central Middle Ages such strategies echoed the *Corpus Dionysiacum* that flourished by the fifth century CE. Although the influence of Pseudo Dionysius Areopagita's doctrine on global medieval culture was extensive[24], there is still much to be said about the field of image creation[25].

The *intersubjective apophatic imagination* is the rhizomatic network

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19 Deleuze and Guattari describe the trajectory of "[...] lignes de fuite, des mouvements de déterritorialisation et de déstratification. [...] Les multiplicités se définissent par le dehors: par la ligne abstraite, ligne de fuite ou de déterritorialisation suivant laquelle elles changent de nature en se connectant avec d'autres. [...] La ligne de fuite marque à la fois la réalité d'un nombre de dimensions finies que la multiplicité remplit effectivement ; l'impossibilité de toute dimension supplémentaire, sans que la multiplicité se transforme suivant cette ligne ; la possibilité et la nécessité d'aplatir toutes ces multiplicités sur un même plan de consistance ou d'extériorité, quelles que soient leurs dimensions."; G. DELEUZE – F. GUATTARI. *Mille plateaux*..., pp. 9-10, 15-16. See also S. O'SULLIVAN, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation*. Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2006, pp. 28-29, 32.

20 See D. CARABINE. *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition, Plato to Eriugena*. Peeters: Louvain, 1995, pp. 13-102.

21 See P. C. FINNEY. *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art*. Oxford University Press: New York (NY); Oxford, 1994, pp. 44, 57.

22 See P. C. FINNEY. *The Invisible God*..., pp. 43ff.; S. MORLET, "« Il est difficile de trouver celui qui est l'auteur et le père de cet univers... » : la réception de *Tim.* 28 c chez les Pères de l'Église" in *Études platoniciennes. 5* (2008), pp. 91-100. Available in https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesplatoniciennes.844.

23 See A. SCHELLENBERG, "Traces of Negative Theology in The Hebrew Bible" in *Revue de l'histoire des religions. 237/2* (2020), pp. 239-257.

24 For a recent survey of the subject see G. KAPRIEV (ed.), *The Dionysian Traditions: 24th Annual Colloquium of the S.I.E.P.M., September 9-11, 2019, Varna, Bulgaria*. Brepols: Turnhout, 2021.

25 For a recent survey of the subject see F. DELL'ACQUA – E. S. MAINOLDI (ed.). **Pseudo-Dionysius and Christian Visual Culture, c. 500-900**. Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, 2020.

in which the intersection of the *via negativa* and visual culture nurtured, among others, abstract and quasi-abstract pictures both iconically and symbolically. I use *imagination* in the present discussion for accentuating the dynamic interaction between image, imagery, and imagination itself as a psychocognitive process. Giselle de Nie has identified this intellectual and physical engagement in medieval Christian civilisation as "spiritual understanding", a critical issue that had at its core the the experience with sacred relics and images[26]. De Nie has commented on it concerning Gregorius Turonensis' [Gregory of Tours] (ca. 538/539-ca. 594) *Libri miraculorum*, in which the Frankish historian left an eloquent testimony on this matter:

> De lancea uero, arundine, spongia, corona spinea et columna, ad quam uerberatus est Dominus et Redemptor Hierosolymis, dicendum. Ad hanc uero columnam multi fide pleni accedentes, corrigias textiles faciunt, eamque circumdant: quas rursum pro benedictione recipiunt, diversis infirmitatibus profuturas. Ferunt etiam ipsas coronae sentes quasi uirides apparere: quae tamen si uideantur aruisse foliis, quotidie tamen reuirescere uirtute diuina[27].

In Gregorious' narrative, as de Nie noted, the thorns of Christ's crown appear to be green but they might at the same time look marcescent, potentially reversable by divine intervention. In the end, the thorns' state would have depended on the devotee's faith. That being so, imagination helped to transform the perception of sensory objects, thus creating a supernatural image. In consequence, "spiritual understanding" required imagination to reveal through mental images the hidden (or invisible) truth of manifest (or visible) reality[28].

Depending on the theological speculation accepted as general background, we can schematically identify two different data processing operations which, in turn, mirror two different gnoseological traditions.

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26 G. DE NIE. "Seeing and Believing in the Early Middle Ages: A Preliminary Investigation" in M. HEUSSER et al. (ed.) *The Pictured Word: Word & Image Interactions 2*. Rodopi: Amsterdam; Atlanta (GA), 1998, pp. 67-76, pp. 69-72.

27 *Libr. mirac.* I *Glor. mart.* 7 (PL 71, col. 712B): "With regard to the lance, the reed, the sponge, the crown of thoms, and the column on which the Lord and Redeemer was whipped at Jerusalem: many who are filled with faith approach this column and tie around it cords they have woven; they receive these cords back as a blessing that will help against various illnesses. They say that the thorns of the crown appear as if alive. But if its leaves seem to have withered, every day they become green again because of divine power." (trans. in GREGORIUS TURONENSIS. *Glory of the Martyrs*. Trans. R. van Dam. Liverpool University Press: Liverpool, 2004, p. 8.).

28 G. DE NIE. "Seeing and Believing..." pp. 72-74.

On the one hand, *spiritual understanding as apophatic understanding* would stress the insurmountable incapacity of human mind to comprehend the Godhead[29]. On the other hand, *cataphatic understanding* would argue the immediate and unerring knowledge that the human mind can have of the Godhead. The nature of images and visual exegesis would be subordinated to either of these two theological and epistemic inclinations that could have served as potential inspiration for them. In both cases the imaginations of both the artificer of the pictures and of their beholders were involved. Therefore, related to the *apophatic image and apophatic understanding, apophatic imagery* was constituted of the shared ensemble of images stimulated by negative theology. Because of this, the understanding of artificers and spectators was supposed to be imperfect and thus limited. The synergic result of this conjunction was what I call as the *intersubjective apophatic imagination*. This gnoseological activity would have been different from the one described by the *cataphatic understanding* of the divine and of images derived from it. For this theological trend, well represented in Augustinus Hipponensis' [Augustine of Hippo] (354-430) thought, the comprehension of images needed of *uisio intellectualis*. Augustinus affirms:

> [...] si quemadmodum raptus est a sensibus corporis, ut esset in istis similitudinibus corporum, quae spiritu uidentur, ita et ab ipsis rapiatur ut in illam quasi regionem intellectualium uel intellegibilium subuehatur, ubi sine ulla corporis similitudine perspicua ueritas cernitur, nullis opinionum falsarum nebulis offuscatur, ibi uirtutes animae non sunt operosae ac laboriosae [...] Propter illud quippe adipiscendum, ubi secura quies erit et ineffabilis uisio ueritatis, labor suscipitur et continendi a uoluptate et sustinendi aduersitates et subueniendi indigentibus et resistendi decipientibus. ibi uidetur claritas domini non per uisionem significantem siue corporalem, sicut uisa est in monte Sina, siue spiritalem, sicut uidit Esaias uel Iohannes in Apocalypsi, sed per speciem non per aenigmata, quantum eam capere humana mens potest, secundum adsumentis dei gratiam, ut os ad os loquatur deus ei quem dignum tali conloquio fecerit, non os corporis, sed mentis [...][30].

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29 See B. McGINN. "'It's Not Dark Yet, but It's Gettin' There'" in H. APPLETON – L. NELSTROP (ed.) *Art and Mysticism: Interfaces in the Medieval and Modern Periods*. Routledge: London; New York (NY), 2018, pp. 199-220.

30 *De Gen. ad litt*. XII.26, 54 (PL 34, col. 476): "[...] if a man has not only been carried out of the body senses to be among the likenesses of bodies seen by the spirit, but it also carried out of these latter to be conveyed, as it were, to the region of the intellectual or intelligible, where transparent truth

Unlike corporeal or spiritual vision, intellectual vision allows the elevated human mind access to an infallible knowledge and, hence, to a "direct vision" of God. According to Augustinian cataphatic theology, because mankind was created in God's likeness, mortal intellect is able to participate of his infinity and to experience the light of the Creator without mediation[31].

To summarise, during the central Middle Ages certain abstract and quasi-abstract images were affected by apophatic theology. The transmission of their iconographic and symbolic content underwent a rhizomatic transmission through *the intersubjective apophatic imagination*. In this regard, the understanding of those pictures was conditioned by the gnoseological specificities of the *via negativa*.

Abstraction and Ineffability

For the analysis of nonfigurative 'ornament' in medieval visual culture, it is convenient to use the notion of *ornamentality* (*ornementalité*) as Jean-Claude Bonne has conceived it[32]. This technical term underlines that the medieval ornament is not a mere repetition of motifs which integrate a local visual repertory and which could be communicated from one tradition to another. Beyond this simplistic account, ornamentality points out that decoration was reduced by contemporary viewers to an accidental and marginal feature within medieval images, unaware of its "diffuse and general [nature, capable of affecting] an entire composition even in its most figurative aspects"[33].

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is seen without any bodily likeness, his vision is darkened by no cloud of false opinion, and there the virtues of the soul are not tedious or burdensome. [...] It is surely in pursuit of this end, where there will be secure peace and the unutterable vision of truth, that man undertakes the labor of restraining his desires, of bearing adversities, of relieving the poor, of opposing deceivers. There the brightness of the Lord is seen, not through a symbolic or corporeal vision, as it was seen on Mount Sinai, nor through a spiritual vision such as Isaiah saw and John in the Apocalypse, but through a direct vision and not through a dark image, as far as the human mind elevated by the grace of God can receive it. In such a vision God speaks face to face to him whom he has made worthy of this communion. And here we are speaking not of the face of the body but of that of the mind." (trans. in. AUGUSTINUS HIPPONENSIS. *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*. Trans. J. H. Taylor. Newman Press: New York [NY]; Mahwah [NJ], 1982, 2, pp. 188-189.).

31 See L. ZWOLLO, "St Augustine on the Soul's Divine Experience: *Visio intellectualis and Imago dei from* Book XII of *De genesi ad litteram libri XII*" in *Studia Patristica*. 70 (2013), pp. 85-91. See also H. L. KESSLER. "Real Absence: Early Medieval Art and the Metamorphosis of Vision" in *Spiritual Seeing: Picturing God's Invisibility in Medieval Art*. University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia (PA), 2000, pp. 104-148, pp. 118, 120-121.

32 J.-C. BONNE. "De l'ornement à l'ornementalité : la mosaïque absidiale de San Clemente de Rome" in *Le rôle de l'ornement dans la peinture murale du Moyen Âge : actes du colloque international tenu à Saint-Lizier du 1er au 4 juin 1995*. Centre d'études supérieures de civilisation médiévale: Poitiers, 1997, pp. 103-119.

33 J.-C. BONNE, "De l'ornement à l'ornementalité..." pp. 103-104.

Abstract and quasi-abstract ornamentality had a strong rapport with both surface and materiality during the Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, and more specifically from the fifth to the twelfth century[34]. The chronological frame is not actually definitive. Still, it seeks to establish a distancing of early and central medieval visual cultures from the naturalistic paradigm that was advocated by classical antiquity and that was roughly reinstalled in the West throughout the Late Romanesque and Early Gothic[35]. Herbert L. Kessler has analysed the themes of surface and materiality in medieval images, remarking that the aesthetic outcome of these pictures "depends on substitution, not illusion"[36]. Kessler observed that it was the beholder's mind which was in charge of spanning the breach between the object itself and what was represented in it[37]. Ornamentality certainly goes in the same direction, yet one step further, as figuration tends to be avoided in favour of stylised motifs seeking to transform the spectator's experience of the visible to an imperfect glimpse of the invisible. Let us examine, for instance, the famous Parousia miniature (fol. 89R) from the ninth-century Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana copy[38] of Kosmas Indikopleustes'[39] [Κοσμάς ο Ινδικοπλεύστης] (†550 ca.) Χριστιανική τοπογραφία (*Topographia christiana*)[40].

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34 Is important not to forget that the interdependence of these elements had its effect on the wider scene of medieval visual culture. Herbert L. Kessler has explained that from Late Antiquity until "at least the twelfth century," there existed a "fundamental metamorphosis of seeing [...] The effect [was] to transmute the narrative and shift the mind to another level of consciousness."; H. L. KESSLER, "Real Absence...", p. 113. See also I. WEINRYB, "Living Matter: Materiality, Maker, and Ornament in the Middle Ages" in *Gesta*. 52/2 (2013), pp. 113-132.

35 See G. BOTO VARELA – M. SERRANO COLL – J. McNEILL (ed.). *Emerging Naturalism: Contexts and Narratives in European Sculpture, 1140-1220*. Brepols: Turnhout, 2020. For an accurate reassessment of abstraction in Gothic images, see A. KUMLER. "Abstraction's Gothic Grounds" in E. GERTSMAN (ed.) *Abstraction in Medieval Art...*, pp. 55-87.

36 H. L. KESSLER. *Seeing Medieval Art*. University of Toronto Press: Ontario; New York (NY); Plymouth, 2011, p. 19. See also H. L. KESSLER. "Real Absence...", p. 120.

37 H. L. KESSLER. *Seeing Medieval Art*, p. 20.

38 Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, Vat.gr.699. Parchment, 123 folios, 337 × 342 mm.

39 From the nineteenth century onwards the authorship of this work has been questioned, and scholars have suggested Constantine of Antioch as a plausible author; see W. WOLSKA-CONUS, "Stephanos d'Athènes et Stephanos d'Alexandrie : essai d'identification et de biographie" in *Revue des études byzantines*. 47/1 (1989), pp. 5-89, pp. 28-31; H. L. KESSLER, "Gazing at the Future: The *Parousia* Miniature in Vatican Cod. gr. 699" in *Spiritual Seeing...*, pp. 88-103, p. 88; M. KOMINKO. *The World of Kosmas: Illustrated Byzantine Codices of the* Christian Topography. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2013, pp. 11-12; H. L. KESSLER. "The Codex Barbarus Scaligeri, the *Christian Topography*, and the Question of Jewish Models of Early Christian Art" in K. KOGMAN-APPEL – M. MEYER (ed.) *Between Judaism and Christianity: Art Historical Essays in Honor of Elisheva (Elisabeth) Revel-Neher*. Brill: Leiden; Boston (MA), 2008, pp. 139-153, pp. 139-140; S. LADERMAN. "Cosmology, Art, and Liturgy" in K. KOGMAN-APPEL – M. MEYER (ed.) *Between Judaism and Christianity...*, pp. 121-139, pp. 134-135; S. LADERMAN. *Images of Cosmology in Jewish and Byzantine Art: God's Blueprint of Creation*. Brill: Leiden; Boston (MA), 2013, p. 47.

40 For a critical edition of this treatise see W. WOLSKA-CONUS (ed.). *Cosmas Indicopleustès : Topographie chrétienne, introduction, texte, critique, illustration, traduction et notes*. 3 vols. Cerf: Paris,

The painting depicts the Second Coming, in which the enthroned Christ is seated at the top of a vertical structure, inscribed in a double-ringed blue mandorla. As Herbert L. Kessler has shown, what the onlooker is actually observing is the orthogonal side view of the Jewish tabernacle that the miniaturist, inspired by Kosmas' theology, has employed to represent the cosmos[41]. Beneath Christ, who is welcoming the blessed souls into the heavens, there are three rectangular niches distributed hierarchically: at the bottom, the awakening dead; above them, the righteous living men; and immediately below God's son, a court of angels[42]. Almost all the figures in the composition direct their gaze to the imposing, frontal portrait of God's son. In the upper partition, where the latter is situated, a golden field surrounds his mandorla. Lying on this precious background, crosswise strings of pearls form diamond-shaped compartments enclosing several fleur-de-lis motifs[43]. What the artificer intended to represent with this ornamental pattern, with its literal and nonliteral materials, is the tabernacle curtain. Hence, the image pays attention to an exegetical tradition of Jewish ascendence that saw the veil as the firmament that separates eternal heaven from the earth of the mortals[44]. As this transcendental reality cannot be properly known, and so not properly depicted, the semiotic effect of ornamentality works in the miniature under the indexical premise of substitution and not of illusion[45].

1968-1973.

[41] H. L. KESSLER. "Gazing at the Future…" pp. 91ff. See also M. KOMINKO. *The World of Kosmas*…, p. 184; S. LADERMAN. *Images of Cosmology*…, pp. 47-50.

[42] W. WOLSKA-CONUS, "La « Topographie Chrétienne » de Cosmas Indicopleustès : hypothèses sur quelques thèmes de son illustration" in *Revue des études byzantines*. *48/1* (1990), pp. 155-191, pp. 157-159. Available in https://doi.org/10.3406/rebyz.1990.1823; H. L. KESSLER. "Gazing at the Future…" pp. 91ff.

[43] Kessler sustains has maintained that "[…] the miniaturist sought to convey heaven's pristine beauty by rendering the curtain in gold and pearls […] according to the text, gold and pearls are lustrous materials that epitomize beauty and hence convey celestial glory; H. L. KESSLER. "Gazing at the Future…" pp. 99, 226 (n. 26). Kos. Indik. *Top. chr*. VII.76 (*PG* 88, col. 376D-377A): Εἰ γὰρ ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἀθανάτους καὶ ἀτρέπτους ἡμᾶς εἰργάσατο, οὐδὲν διεφέρομεν τῶν ἀλόγων τῶν φυσικῶς μὲν ἐχόντων τι χρήσιμον, ἀγνοούντων δὲ τί κέκτηνται, οἷον ἡ μέλιττα τὸ κηρίον σοφῶς ἐργαζομένη, καὶ ἡ ἀράχνη εὐτέχνως ἱστουργοῦσα, καὶ ὁ μύρμηξ θέρους ἑτοιμαζόμενος τὴν τροφήν, οὐκ ἐπιστήμηι λογικῆι τινι ποιοῦσιν, ἢ ὡς ὁ χρυσὸς καὶ ὁ μαργαρίτης καλοὶ μέν, ἀλλ᾽ οὐκ αἰσθάνονται τοῦ οἰκείου κάλλους. ("For if He had made us from the beginning immortal and immutable, we would have differed nothing from the non-rational animals which have by nature something good and useful, though without their knowing what they possess — just as the bee which with wisdom constructs its honeycomb, and the spider which with great skill weaves its network, and the ant which in summer prepares its store of food, do not do these things with any rational knowledge, but are as unconscious of their art as gold and pearl are of the beauty which adorns them." [trans. in KOSMAS INDIKOPLEUSTES. *The Christian Topography*…, p. 295.]).

[44] H. L. KESSLER. "Gazing at the Future…" pp. 98-99.

[45] Notwithstanding that it would be inadequate to affirm that Kosmas was an apophatic thinker, there are some negative implications in his arguments. Effectively, according to the author, there exists a limitation to the natural cognition of the divine while humans are in their transitory and imperfect life; e.g., Kos. Indik. *Top. chr*. V.228 (*PG* 88, col. 305C-D): Οὐ γὰρ ἐν τῆι ζωῆι ταύτηι

More radical strategies can be found in much earlier examples than this Byzantine manuscript: to be specific, in the in the widespread abstract ornamentality in the Insular tradition and particularly in the renowned Lindisfarne Gospels[46]. The iconographic and symbolic links between Byzantine and Insular cultures shed light on mutual aesthetic concerns that endorse a shared transregional creative ground. In many ways, this assertion is consistent with Wilhelm Koehler's pioneering hypothesis that Anglo-Saxon illumination developed as the result of the forceful and eclectic interaction of agents and influences, including both figurative and nonfigurative representation[47]. Across the expanse of this rhizomatic matrix, *intersubjective apophatic imagination* was a determining factor.

Produced about a century before the Vatican *Topographia christiana*, the Lindisfarne Gospels exhibit an outstanding commitment to mathematical abstraction. Even when its visual content is not constrained to nonfigurative images, abstract depictions based on numbers are surely one of the manuscript's most prominent features[48]. The codex's sophisticated decorative programme includes five carpet pages (fols. 2V, 26V, 94V, 138V, 210V) with crosses inserted in the compositions, next to incipit pages with corresponding ornamented initials and text[49]. The

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τῆι προσκαίρωι ἐστὶν ἡ ἡμετέρα ἐλπίς, ἀλλ᾽ ἐν τῆι μελλούσηι ἀτελευτήτωι, ἐν ἧι υἱοθεσία καὶ ἀπολύτρωσις καὶ ἀτρεπτότης καὶ δικαιοσύνη καὶ ἁγιασμὸς καὶ μακαριότης ὑπάρχει καὶ τελεία γνῶσις καὶ πᾶν ὁτιοῦν καλὸν ἡμῖν ἀπόκειται λαμβάνειν παρὰ τοῦ Θεοῦ, πεπειραμένοι ἀπ᾽ ἐντεῦθεν καλῶν καὶ κακῶν, ἵν᾽ εἰδείημεν τῶν παρεχομένων ἡμῖν ἀγαθῶν τὴν δύναμιν, καθὼς ἐνδέχεται, τρόπον τινὰ υἱοὶ Θεοῦ γενόμενοι καὶ δοξαζόμενοι δόξηι καὶ χαρᾶι ἀνεκλαλήτωι. ("For it is not in this transitory life that our hope lies, but in that future life which hath no end, wherein is our adoption as sons, and redemption and immutability, and righteousness, and sanctification, and blessedness, and perfect knowledge and glory, and whatever other blessings are laid up for us to be received from God, after we have had here experience of things both good and bad, in order that as far as possible we may know the full strength of the good things reserved for us, who in a certain sense become the sons of God, and are exalted to glory and joy unspeakable." [trans. in KOSMAS INDIKOPLEUSTES. *The Christian Topography*…, p. 231.]).

46 London, British Library, Cotton MS Nero D IV. Parchment, 259 folios, 365 × 275 mm.

47 See W. KOEHLER. *Buchmalerei des frühen Mittelalters: Fragmente und Entwürfe aus dem Nachlaß.* E. KITZINGER – F. MÜTHERICH (ed.). Prestel: München, 1972.

48 For analysis on this matter among others see J. GUILMAIN, "The Composition of the First Cross Page of the Lindisfarne Gospels: 'Square Schematism' and the Hiberno-Saxon Aesthetic" in *The Art Bulletin*. 67/4 (1985), pp. 535-547. Available in https://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.1985.10788291; J. GUILMAIN, "The Geometry of the Cross-Carpet Pages in the Lindisfarne Gospels" in *Speculum*. 62/1 (1987), pp. 21-52; M. P. BROWN. *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society, Spirituality and the Scribe.* University of Toronto Press: Toronto, Buffalo (NY), 2003; C. VALLE. *Woven Words in the Lindisfarne Gospels.* PhD dissertation. Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore (MA), 2015; B. C. TILGHMAN, "The Shape of the Word: Extralinguistic Meaning in Insular Display Lettering" in *Word & Image*. 27/3 (2011), pp. 292–308. Available in https://doi.org/10.1080/02666286.2011.541129; B. C. TILGHMAN, "Ornament and Incarnation in Insular Art" in *Gesta*. 55/2 (2016), pp. 157-177; B. C. TILGHMAN, "Pattern, Process, and the Creation of Meaning in the Lindisfarne Gospels" in *West 86th*. 24/1 (2017), pp. 3-28.

49 The book also includes the portraits of the four Evangelists in fols. 5ᵛ (Matthew), 93ᵛ (Mark),

first of these carpet pages is dedicated to opening the prefatory material (Jerome's epistle to Pope Damasus I and *Plures fuisse*, and Eusebius' epistle to Carpianus), while the others are connected to each of the Gospels[50].

Michelle P. Brown has underscored the British Isles' multi-ethnic environment in which the book was executed — "blending influences from Celtic, Pictish, Germanic, Anglo-Saxon and Mediterranean art (including Roman, Italo-Byzantine, Byzantine, Syriac, Armenian and Coptic traditions)"[51] — cultural referents that were an inspiration for the Lindisfarne Gospels' decoration. In the particular case of cross-carpet pages, with their highly elaborate abstract designs, their iconographic and ideological motifs might have been incubated in Coptic Egypt or in the Christian Orient[52]. These images are the quintessential visual device for guiding the reader/viewer into a "mystical experience.[53]" The details of the complex mathematical operations behind their designs are not pertinent here. What is significant is to reflect on their visual effects and the possible theological stimuli that inspired the abstract nature of such pictures. For these purposes, the figure of Bede (672/673-735) must be seriously considered.

Specialists have argued that the Northumbrian monk and historian requested a sixth-century Calabrian copy of the *Vulgate* version of the Gospels by Saint Jerome to be sent to Lindisfarne[54]. This codex would have served as an exemplar for the creation of the Lindisfarne Gospels, the most important book at the Cuthbertine shrine on Holy Island[55]. From Aldred's tenth-century (*ca.* 950-970) colophon in Old English, scholars

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137[V] (Luke), and 209[V] (John), and a Chi-rho page in fol. 29[R]. Major initials can be found throughout the entire codex.

50 For comments on the manuscript's textual contents, see M. P. BROWN. *The Lindisfarne Gospels*…, pp. 172-199.

51 M. P. BROWN. *The Lindisfarne Gospels*…, p. 272; M. P. BROWN. "Reading the Lindisfarne Gospels: Text, Image, Context" in R. GAMESON (ed.) *The Lindisfarne Gospels: New Perspectives*. Leiden; Boston (MA): Brill, 2017, pp. 84-95, p. 91.

52 J. GUILMAIN, "The Composition of the First Cross Page…" p. 544 (note 20); J. GUILMAIN, "The Geometry of the Cross-Carpet Pages…" p. 48 (note 44); M. P. BROWN. "Bede's Life in Context" in S. DeGREGORIO (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Bede*. Cambridge; New York (NY): Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 3-24, p. 21; M. P. BROWN, *The Lindisfarne Gospels*…, p. 325; C. VALLE. *Woven Words*…, p. 81.

53 J. GUILMAIN, "The Composition of the First Cross Page…" pp. 546-547.

54 The manuscript contains liturgical feasts expressly associated with the Neapolitan hagiological cult; see: P. H. BLAIR. *The World of Bede*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 231; M. P. BROWN. *The Lindisfarne Gospels*…, pp. 164-166; C. VALLE. *Woven Words*…, p. 80; M. P. BROWN. "Reading the Lindisfarne Gospels…" pp. 92-93.

55 M. P. BROWN. "Bede's Life in Context" p. 19. Nees has questioned the reliability of the traditional origin attributed to the Gospels; see L. NEES, "Reading Aldred's Colophon for the Lindisfarne Gospels" in *Speculum*. 78/2 (2003), pp. 333-377.

have defended the hypothesis that Bishop Eadfrith of Lindisfarne (†721) was both the intellectual artificer and the physical maker of the manuscript[56]. If this premise is accepted, the decorative programme of the Lindisfarne Gospels was the consequence of the intellectual exchange between Bede and Eadfrith[57]. The author of the *Historia ecclesiastica* would have had, in this case, a more decisive authority than just an indirect influence on the codex. Hence, the comprehension of the carpet pages may be enriched if Bede's apophatic spiritual observations are kept in mind[58]. The abstract character of the manuscript's five ornamented folios challenges the beholder's visual and theoretical discernment. The compositions, which cover the surfaces almost entirely with forms of diverse nature, are rooted in a troubled equilibrium between order and confusion. Valle has discussed this feature, pondering on the rhetorical figures of ambiguity and obscurity as used in early medieval exegesis for describing "words contained in Scripture when the truth of their content [was] difficult to access"[59]. Precisely, ambiguity and obscurity characterise the aporetic relationship of the representational with the nonrepresentational in the Lindisfarne Gospels' carpet pages.

In an important exegetical work from ca. 716[60], *In Cantica canticorum*, Bede affirms through the voice of Christ impersonated:

> Ac si aperte dicatur, Oculos quidem tibi columbinos dedi, quibus Scripturarum arcana cognosceres, quibus

56 R. GAMESON. "Why Did Eadfrith Write the Lindisfarne Gospels?" in R. GAMESON – H. LEYSER (ed.) *Belief and Culture in the Middle Ages Studies Presented to Henry Mayr-Harting*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2002, pp. 45-58, pp. 45ff; M. P. BROWN. *The Lindisfarne Gospels...*, pp. 58ff; C. VALLE. *Woven Words...*, pp. xxv-xxvi; M. P. BROWN. "'A Good Woman's Son': Aspects of Aldred's Agenda in Glossing the Lindisfarne Gospels" in J. FERNÁNDEZ CUESTA – S. M. PONS-SANZ (ed.) *The Old English Gloss to the Lindisfarne Gospels: Language, Author and Context*. Gruyter: Berlin; Boston (MA), 2016; pp. 13-36, p. 14; M. P. BROWN. "Reading the Lindisfarne Gospels: Text, Image, Context" in R. GAMESON (ed.) *The Lindisfarne Gospels: New Perspectives*. Brill: Leiden; Boston (MA), 2017, pp. 84-95, p. 84.

57 M. P. BROWN, "Bede's Life in Context" p. 21. It should be remembered that Eadfrith commissioned Bede to compose a life of St Cuthbert, a prose text that was written between *ca*. 720 and 722; see C. STANCLIFFE, "Disputed Episcopacy: Bede, Acca, and the Relationship between Stephen's *Life of St Wilfrid* and the early prose Lives of St Cuthbert" in *Anglo-Saxon England*. 41 (2012), pp. 7-39, p. 24. Available in https://doi.org/10.1017/S0263675112000099; R. GAMESON. "Northumbrian Books in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries" in R. GAMESON (ed.) *The Lindisfarne...*, pp. 43-83, p. 50.

58 On Bede's relationship with the apophatic, see S. DeGREGORIO, "The Venerable Bede on Prayer and Contemplation" in *Traditio*. 54 (1999), pp. 1-39. Available in https://doi.org/10.1017/S0362152900012186; E. AHERN. *Bede and the Cosmos: Theology and Nature in the Eighth Century*. Routledge: London; New York (NY), 2020, pp. 151-174.

59 C. VALLE. *Woven Words...*, p. 104.

60 S. DeGREGORIO. "Bede and the Old Testament" in S. DeGREGORIO (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Bede*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2010, pp. 127-141, p. 131.

uirtutes a uitiis secerneres, quibus semitas iustitiae, per quas adhuc uenires, dignosceres. Sed cave, ne ipsos ad me oculos etiam ad me uidendum intendere quaeras. *Non enim uidebit homo faciem meam, et uiuet.* Erit enim tempus, cum uinculis absoluta carneis ad me peruenies, et tunc implebitur quod promisi, *quia qui diligit me, diligetur a Patre meo, et ego diligam eum, et manifestabo ei meipsum.* At nunc dum in corpore constituta peregrinaris a perennibus bonis, averte oculos tuae mentis a contemplatione diuinae maiestatis et essentiae, quia *ipsi me auolare fecerunt*, id est, ipsi tui sensus spirituales, quibus me perfecte cognoscere desiderasti, quamuis multum se extollant, non in hac vita me ad perfectum comprehendere sufficiunt, sed ad hoc solummodo peruenire queunt, ut animaduertant diuinae gloriam naturae, tantae esse sublimitatis, quæ nequaquam uideri possit, nisi ab his tantum qui a vita uisibili funditus ablati, atque ad inuisibilem fuerint introducti[61].

This passage is persuasive about Bede's affinity with negative theology. As he thought, human "spiritual senses" are inadequate to grasp God's glorious nature even if elevated to the uppermost heights of corporeal existence. Because mortal understanding is relentlessly tied to visible and imperfect reality, divine invisibility occurs beyond ordinary comprehension. In this light, the Lindisfarne Gospel's carpet pages, while imitating textiles and other materials — precious stones[62], enamel, glass, and metal — seek to make it evident that the most treasured things are "insufficient" to provide the reader/viewer with the slightest glimpse of "divine majesty and essence." The intricate geometric abstract

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61 *In Cant.* 4 (*PL* 91, V, col. 1177-B-C): "I gave you the eyes of doves by which you might come to know the hidden things of the Scriptures, by which you might separate virtues from vices, by which you might discern the paths of justice through which you might come to me. But take heed lest you try to direct your bodily eyes even to gazing at Me, for "no man shall see" My face "and live." For a time will come when, set free from the chains of the flesh, you will come to me and then what I have promised will be fulfilled, for "he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him." But now, so long as you are sojourning away from everlasting goods owing to the fact that you are bound up in a body, turn the eyes of your mind away from the contemplation of My divine majesty and essence, since those very things cause Me to vanish — that is, your spiritual senses by which you have desired to know me perfectly. Although they raise themselves up greatly, they are insufficient to comprehend Me perfectly in this life, but can only come to this point: that they acknowledge that the glory of the divine nature is of such sublimity, that it can in no way be seen except by those who have been so utterly removed from the visible life and have been brought to the invisible." (trans. in S. DeGREGORIO. "The Venerable Bede…", p. 31).

62 Brown has explained that "[…] the Lindisfarne Gospels' cross-carpet pages are the embodiment of the *crux gemmata* (the jewelled cross), the symbolic representation of the Godhead by means of abstract, symbolic substitution which had been favoured in the Early Christian tradition."; M. P. BROWN. *The Lindisfarne Gospels…*, p. 324.

ornamentality in these folios reinforces this unrepresentable character of God since the tangible cannot communicate what exceeds human cognition[63]. Also, in order to support the influence of the *via negativa* in the Lindisfarne Gospels through Bede, it cannot be ignored that the latter is still the earliest Insular author ever overtly to have cited a treatise by Pseudo Dionysius[64].

Anglo-Saxon culture and the Frankish milieu shared bidirectional influences for many reasons: among others, due to missionaries from the British Isles who exported theological concerns and visual models to the continent. That was the case of the Deiran monk Willibrord (658?-739), once based at the Irish monastery of Rath Melsigi, and sent in 690 by the Northumbrian abbot Ecgberht of Ripon (†729) to spread the Christian beliefs to the Frisians. In 698, Irmina (†704/710 *ca*.), Abbess of Ören and Pippin II's (†714) mother-in-law, donated the lands where Willibrord founded the monastery of Echternach, in present-day Luxemburg. Echternach had a decisive role in the transmission of Insular scholarly and also visual culture in the Merovingian kingdom. Willibrord, having the blessing of Pope Sergius (†701) who named him archbishop of the Frisians at the request of Pippin II in 695, constructed a great monastery in Echternach between 704 and 706. In these new facilities a scriptorium was active, the work of which is known today because of the four manuscripts, "all written and decorated in the Insular style by scribes whose names appear on Echternach charters from the first two decades of the eighth century"[65]. This sort of interaction helps partially to explain the presence of Anglo-Saxon ornamentality in later Carolingian and Ottonian manuscripts.

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63 Bede *Hist. eccl.* III.22 (*PL* 95, col. 152A): "Deum potius intellegendum maiestate incomprehensibilem, humanis oculis inuisibilem, omnipotentem, aeternum, qui caelum et terram et humanum genus creasset, regeret et iudicaturus esset orbem in aequitate; cuius sedes aeterna non in uili et caduco metallo sed in caelis esset credenda [...]." ("God must rather be looked upon as incomprehensible in His majesty, invisible to human eyes, omnipotent, eternal, Creator of heaven and earth and mankind, who rules over the world and will judge it in righteousness. We must believe that His eternal abode is in heaven, not in base and perishable metal." [trans. in BEDE. *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People; The Greater Chronicle; Bede's Letter to Egbert*. Trans. B. Colgrave. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1999, p. 145.]).

64 See In *Marc.* II (*PL* 92 col. 197B). Also see T. FLIGHT, "'Through a Glass, Darkly': Evidence for Knowledge of Pseudo-Dionysius in Anglo-Saxon England" in *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures*. *43/1* (2017), pp. 12ff. Available in https://doi.org/10.5325/jmedirelicult.43.1.0001. Is interesting to consider that Kosmas' *Topographia christiana* was also known in the Anglo-Saxon world; see C. O'BRIEN. *Bede's Temple: An Image and its Interpretation*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2015, pp. 74ff.

65 M. A. CLAUSSE. *The Reform of the Frankish Church: Chrodegang of Metz and the Regula canonicorum in the Eight Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 33-34; N. NETZER. *Cultural Interplay in the Eighth Century: The Trier Gospels and the Makings of a Scriptorium at Echternach*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2008, pp. 4-5. See also R. NEU. *Willibrord und die Christianisierung Europas im Frühmittelalter*. Kohlhammer: Stuttgart, 2021.

In the context of the Carolingian dynasty, Pseudo Dionysius' theology was surely critical. Indeed, the patronage of Dionysian culture stimulated by Louis the Pious (778-840) was perpetuated by Charles the Bald (823-877)[66], which had an enormous impact on subsequent Carolingian and Ottonian bibliophilic practices. This is confirmed by two important manuscripts which are closely connected, the *Codex Aureus* of Saint-Emmeram[67] and the Sacramentary of Henry II[68]. In both of them, Ioannes Scotus Eriugena's (810-ca. 877) theology had direct or indirect impact. Eriugena's prominence in Charles' court is another symptom of the incessant scholarly dialogue between the Anglo-Saxon and Frankish kingdoms. An essential aspect of Eriugena's familiarity with the *via negativa* is that his understanding of the subject was not limited to the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. Together with the translation of Pseudo Dionysius' work, he also delivered complete Latin versions of Gregorius Nyssenus' [Gregory of Nyssa] (ca. 335-ca. 394) *De hominis opificio* (under the title *De imagine*) and Maximus Confessor's (ca. 580-662) *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*[69], two significant Eastern authorities on apophatic thinking. His exceptional skills granted him a significant reputation at Charles' court, which may have justified his contribution to the creation of the *Codex Aureus*. In their seminal study on the manuscript *tituli*, Paul Edward Dutton and Edouard Jeauneau have demonstrated that Eriugena's thought shaped its cover and the internal iconographic programme[70]. This hypothesis has been supported by Yves Christe, who expanded it to Carolingian visual and material cultures in general at the time of Charles[71].

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66 K. RUH. *Die mystische Gotteslehre des Dionysius Areopagita*. Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften: München, 1987, pp. 55ff. See also among many others F. A. STAUDENMAIER. *Johannes Scotus Erigena und die Wissenschraft seiner Zeit, mit allegemeinen Entwicklungen der hauptwahrheiten auf dem Geibiete der Philosophie und Religeon und Grundzügen zur einer Geschichte der speculativen Theologie*. Frankfurt am Main: Andreäi, 1834; G. THÉRY, "Scot Erigène [sic]: traducteur de Denys" in *Bulletin du Cange : Archivium Latinatis Medii Aevi. 6* (1931), pp. 185-278; G. THÉRY, "Scot Erigène [sic]: traducteur de Denys" in *New Scholasticism*. 7/2 (1933), pp. 91-108. Available in https://doi.org/10.5840/newscholas19337218; E. JEAUNEAU, "Jean Scot Érigène et le grec" in *Bulletin du Cange : Archivium Latinatis Medii Aevi. 41* (1979), pp. 5-50; E. JEAUNEAU, "Jean Scot Érigène: grandeur et misère du métier de traducteur" in *Documents, études et répertoires de l'Institut de Recherche et d'Histoire des Textes*. 42 (1989), pp. 99-108; D. CARABINE. *John Scottus Eriugena*. Oxford University Press: New York (NY); Oxford, 2000; V. LIMBERGER. *Eriugenas Hypertheologie*. Gruyter: Berlin; Boston (MA), 2015.

67 Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 14000. Parchment, 126 folios, 420 × 330 mm.

68 Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 4456. Parchment, 358 folios, 300 × 240 mm.

69 D. CARABINE. *John Scottus Eriugena…*, p. 16.

70 P. E. DUTTON – E. JEAUNEAU, "The Verses of the Codex Aureus of Saint-Emmeram" in *Studi medievali*. Ser. 3, 24/1 (1983), pp. 75-120.Ser. 3, 24/1 (1983), pp. 75-120.

71 See Y. CHRISTI. "Quelques portails romans et l'idée de théophanie selon Jean Scot Érigène" in J. O'MEARA – L. BIELER (ed.) *The Mind of Eriugena: Papers of a Colloquium, Dublin, 14-18 July 1970*. Irish University Press for Royal Irish Academy: Dublin, 1973, pp. 182-189; Y. CHRISTI. "Influences et retentissement de l'œuvre de Jean Scot sur l'art médiéval : bilan et perspectives"

Riccardo Pizzinato, for his part, has proposed interpreting the manuscript's visual content as reflecting the Eriugenian notion of *theophania*, which is represented, for example, through the Scriptures in the four lavishly decorated incipit pages to the Gospels (fols. 16V, 46V, 65V, 97V)[72]. In these folios the interplay between abstract ornamentality and figuration is astonishing. Certainly, their dazzling aesthetic effect eclipses description and is unachievable to be properly captured through photographic reproduction: while in the latter the illuminations appear completely motionless, in the original manuscript vibrant colours and the almost impenetrable designs tend to cloud the vision of the reader/ viewer or even blind them. Similarly, because of their overwhelming use of representational and nonrepresentational motifs in which script seems to fade away, the initial folios connected to each Gospel (fols. 17R, 47R, 66R, 98R) are so impressive that an accurate characterisation might not be possible.

The *In principio* page of John's Gospel (fol. 98R), for instance, exhibits a perplexing arrangement of letters. The illuminator situates the full text *In principio erat Verbu*(*m*) in a rectangular, vertical register placed at the centre. The prominent 'I' is crowned by a complex chapter of sorts formed by interlacing threads ending in elegant acanthus leaves. The wide 'N' crosses the 'I' at its waist. White interlacing knot patterns in the letter's inner bodies are edged with golden perimetric lines bordered with red. This delimitating procedure is extensively used in other motifs. "P", "R, "I", and "N" are camouflaged under the wide 'N' in the middle of a nearly indiscernible pattern. Without surpassing the wide 'N' breadth, three lines with the remaining letters show interlaces that fold in all kinds of ways. Rinceaux at left and right, and acanthus leaves at the lateral sides of the three lines with text, end up inundating the register until reaching its interior margins. Two frames enclose the register. The inner one is formed by frontal and side viewed acanthus leaves, eight roundels distributed quasi-equidistantly, and intermediate bands with red, white, and purple dots with golden veins simulating marble. The outer one is a golden field populated by depictions of green (emeralds?) and purple (amethyst?) precious stones, regularly organised[73].

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in W. BEIERWALTES (ed.) *Eriugena redivivus: zur Wirkungsgeschichte seines Denkens im Mittelalter und im Übergang zur Neuzeit, Vorträge des V. internationalen Eriugena-Colloquiums. Werner-Reimers-Stiftung Bad Homburg, 26.–30. August 1985.* Winter: Heidelberg, 1987, pp. 142-161.

72 R. PIZZINATO. Exitus et Reditus*: The* Codex Aureus *of Saint Emmeram as Pictorial Exegesis.* PhD dissertation. Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore (MA), 2012, pp. 47, 92ff.

73 It seems logical that the stones depicted in this folio are inspired by the Apocalyptic description of the heavenly Jerusalem also attributed to John: "[...] fundamenta muri civitatis omni lapide pretioso ornata fundamentum primum jaspis secundus sapphyrus tertius carcedonius quartus zmaragdus quintus sardonix sextus sardinus septimus chrysolitus octavus berillus nonus

Pizzinato's observations about these images as *theophanies* seem plausible, but if so then the *In principio* page is extremely effective from an apophatic perspective, that is to say, it ambiguously reveals and hides its content as a glimpse of the divine that defies the onlooker's sight and understanding. The bewilderment produced by saturation is an aesthetic strategy consciously employed by the codex' artificer in order to obstruct immediate signification. Precisely, as Eriugena expressed in a widely cited passage of the *Periphyseon*, God's appearance, ultimately, is by his very nature "unknowable and unutterable":

> Inuenit autem per theophanias, per naturae uero diuinae per seipsam contemplationem non invenit. Theophanias autem dico uisibilium et inuisibilium species, quarum ordine et pulchritudine cognoscitur Deus esse, et invenitur non quid est, sed quia solummodo est, quoniam ipsa Dei natura nec dicitur nec intelligitur; superat namque omnem intellectum lux inaccessibilis[74].

In a similar tone, Eriugena stated before, on the contemplation of Divine Goodness:

> Ineffabilem et incomprehensibilem diuinae bonitatis inaccessibilem que claritatem omnibus intellectibus siue humanis, siue angelicis incognitam — superessentialis est enim et supernaturalis — eo nomine significatam crediderim, quae dum per se ipsam cogitatur, neque est, neque erat, neque erit. In nullo enim intelligitur existentium, quia superat omnia; dum uero per condescensionem quandam ineffabibilem in ea, quae sunt, mentis obtutibus inspicitur, ipsa sola in omnibus inuenitur esse, et est, et erat, et erit[75].

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topazius decimus chrysoprassus undecimus hyacinthus duodecimus amethistus […]"; Ap 21, 19-20.

74 *Periph.* V.26.21-22 (*PL* 122, col. 680D-681A): "It finds It through theophanies, but through the contemplation of the Divine Nature Itself it does not find it. Now by Theophanies I mean the species of all things visible and invisible, by the beauty and order of which it is made known that God exists, and it is found not *what* God is, but only *that* God is: for God's very nature is unknowable and unutterable, since the Inaccessible Light transcends every intellect." (trans. in IOANNES SCOTUS ERIUGENA. *Periphyseon: The Division of Nature*. Trans. I.P. Sheldon-Williams – J. J. O'Meara. Montréal: Bellarmin; Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1987, p. 593.).

75 *Periph.* III.19.2-3 (*PL* 122, col. 919C-D): "I should believe that by that name is signified the ineffable and incomprehensible and inaccessible brilliance of Divine Goodness which is unknown to all intellects whether human or angelic — for it is superessential and supernatural —, which while it is contemplated in itself neither is nor was nor shall be, for it is understood to be in none of the things that exist because it surpasses all things, but when, by a certain ineffable descent into the

In the context of Eriugena's negative speculations, not even through theophany does God manifest what he is. As the apophatic tradition has established since Late Antiquity, God might be intelligible according to the cognitive aptitudes of the knower, but infinite and impenetrable divine essence cannot be scrutinised[76].

The incipit page to the Martyrology (fol. 4v) of the Sacramentary of Henry II, the first decorated page in this manuscript, closely resembles the *In principio* page of the *Codex Aureus* of Saint-Emmeram[77]. The correspondence between these two books is consistent with the role that the Codex Aureus played in the creation of the sacramentary. There is no accurate information about how the former arrived in Saint-Emmeram, but for Abbot Ramwold of Saint Maximin (†1000/1001) it was a valuable possession and, being treasured there, served as exemplar for Henry's precious manuscript[78]. Therefore, following this model, after the miniatures of Henry crowned by Christ (fol. 11R) and enthroned (fol. 11V), and the portrait of Gregorius Magnus (fol. 12R), fols. 12V and 13R function as a diptych united by the formula *IN-cipit LI-ber sacramento*(*rum*), preceding four decorated pages (fols. 13V, 14R, 14V, 16R)[79]. Copiously ornamented, each of these folios seems to confront the *fear of emptiness*. Apropos the *intersubjective apophatic imagination*, it is difficult not to think of the effect of Islamic visual culture in the Christian world at that time. Thus, for example, textiles, Byzantine or Islamic[80], were luxurious

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things that are, it its beheld by the mind's eye, it alone is found to be in all things, and it is and was and shall be." (trans. in IOANNES SCOTUS ERIUGENA. *Periphyseon*..., pp. 307-308.)

76 H. A.-M. MOONEY. *Theophany: The Appearing of God According to the Writings of Johannes Scottus Eriugena*. Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen, 2009, pp. 203-204. Hilary Anne-Marie Mooney has commented on the two Eriugenian passages quoted above in her monograph. See also E. FALQUE, "Jean Scot Érigène : la théophanie comme mode de la phénoménalité" in *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*. *86/3* (2002), pp. 387-421. Available in https://doi.org/10.3917/rspt.863.0387.

77 M. PIPPAL. "Die malerische Ausstattung des Sakramentars" in R. GRIEBEL et al. *Sakramentar Heinrichs II.: Handschrift Clm 4456 der Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek, München, Kommentarband*. Faksimile: Gütersloh; München, 2010, pp. 51-124, p. 66.

78 G. SWARZENSKI. *Die Regensburger Buchmalerei des X. und XI. Jahrhunderts: Studien zur Geschichte der deutschen Malerei des frühen Mittelalters*. Hiersemann: Leipzig, 1901, pp. 63-87, pp. 67-78 E. KLEMM. *Katalog der illuminierten Handschriften der Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek in München, II: Die ottonischen und frühromanischen Handschriften der Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek*, Reichert: Wiesbaden, 2004, Kat.Nr. 9, pp. 30-34, p. 33; B. GULLATH. "Kodikologie und Geschichte des Sakramentars Heinrichs II." in R. GRIEBEL et al. *Sakramentar Heinrichs II.*..., pp. 9-28, p. 16; M. PIPPAL. "Die malerische Ausstattung des Sakramentars" pp. 53-56.

79 Fol. 13V, *Per omnia saecula ... Dignum et iustum est*; fol. 14R, "*V*(*ere*) *D*(*ignum*) ... *per Christum dominum nostrum*; fol. 14V, *per quem maiestatem ... qui venit in nomine domine osanna in excelsis*; fol. 16R, *Te igitur clementissime pater*.

80 Textile production in the context of these societies was so closely related that in many cases it is not possible to establish a specific origin; E. R. HOFFMAN, "Pathways of Portability: Islamic and Christian Interchange from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century" in *Art History*. *24/1* (2001), pp. 17-50, p.18. Available in https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.00248; T. K. THOMAS, "Silks" in H. C.

goods immensely desired by the nobility and clerics, which became "an integral part of gift exchanges between secular and ecclesiastical leaders"[81]. Fulfilling that sort of consumption, ornamentality was associated to a dominant formal conception in cloth which, of course, did not exclude latent or evident spiritual signification. Not in vain did Islamic aniconism have a potential apophatic accent which could be detected in Muhammad's own statements. In this regard, G. R. D. King has adduced that "[t]he matter of representations of God had already been settled in Islam in the lifetime of the Prophet: the inconceivable was beyond encompassing by any artistic repertoire [...]"[82].

Reflecting all these influences, the ornamented pages in the Sacramentary of Henry II symbolically acted as a threshold for the officiant penetrating into the mysterious celebration of mass[83]. Tobias Frese has commented on this important spatial aspect of the sacramentary, suggesting that, in a pragmatic sense, these pages were basically impossible to read in their original context[84]. In the dark interior of an early medieval church — barely lit by tapers in candleholders and chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, heavily obscured by the incense smoke — the complex design of the folios made the text indiscernible for the priest at first sight. Hence, the unreadable words would probably have served as reminders of God's incomprehensible essence, and, at the same time, as a mnemotechnic aid for the celebration of mass. That said, this convoluted vision leads to several folios where, as Frese has also claimed, the text is presented in the most organised and harmonious manner[85]. In consequence, in these pages abstract and schematic motifs are limited just to the margins. Exquisite borders frame the written area with kaleidoscopic acanthus leaves (fols. 16V, 17 R, 17V, 18R, 18V, 19R, 19V, 20R, 20V)[86]. As it happens, the design has been planned so carefully that

EVANS – B. RATLIFF (ed.) *Byzantium and Islam...*, pp. 148-159, p. 148.

81 S. WAGNER. "The Impact of Silk on Ottonian and Salian Manuscripts" in TEXTILE SOCIETY OF AMERICA, *Silk Roads, Other Roads: Proceedings of the 8th Biennial Symposium of the Textile Society of America, September 26-28, 2002*. Textile Society of America: Earleville (MD); Omnipress: Madison (WI), 2003, pp. 135-144, p. 135.

82 G. R. D. KING. "Islam, Iconoclasm...", p. 214. For a synoptic view of Muhammad's attitudes toward images according to the hadiths, see J. J. ELIAS. *Aisha's Cushion...*, pp. 9ff.

83 On the transformative character of decorated folios see N. THEBAUT. "The Double-Sided Image: Abstraction and Figuration in Early Medieval Painting" in E. GERTSMAN (ed.) *Abstraction in Medieval Art...*, pp. 213-242.

84 T. FRESE. ",Kommt und seht den Ort' - sakrale Schrifträume im Sakramentar Heinrichs II." in T. FRESE et al. (ed.) *Sacred Scripture/Sacred Space: The Interlacing of Real Places and Conceptual Spaces in Medieval Art and Architecture*. Berlin; Boston (MA): Gruyter, 2019, pp. 37-62, p. 51.

85 T. FRESE. ",Kommt und seht den Ort'..." pp. 52-55.

86 *Canon missae*: fol. 16V, *per Iesum Christum filium tuum ... atque catholice et apostolice fidei cultoribus*; fol. 17 R, *(Me)mento et iam domine ... Thome, Iacobi*; fol. 17V, *Philippi, Barholomei ... Quam oblationem*

two adjacent verso and recto folios, such as 16V and 17R, are rendered in almost perfect bilateral symmetry.

Abstract ornamentality had at least a double purpose in Carolingian and Ottonian manuscripts. In the first place, it helped to 'create' the ineffable realm in which past, present, or future theophanies may occur. The formal and iconographic allusion to textiles — ornamented pages such as the so-called 'carpet-pages' — are quite evocative concerning this issue[87], underscoring divine nature's inaccessibility. As I have mentioned, in the Vatican miniature of the Parousia a diapered background for the enthroned Christ represents the veil of the tabernacle, an iconographic resource which points out to ineffability and that is easily detectable in other Byzantine images. Ornamentality is employed under this symbolic principle in the famous image of the Mandylion (μανδύλιον) and the Holy Tile (κεράμιον) from an eleventh or early-twelfth-century copy of Ioannes Climacus' [John Climacus] (ca. 579-ca.649) Κλίμαξ (*Scala paradisi*)[88], fol. 12V[89], and in a miniature which depicts Habakkuk's vision from a twelfth-century copy of Gregorius Nazianzenus' [Gregory of Nazianzus] (ca. 330-ca. 389) Ομιλίες (*Homiliae*)[90], fol. 9V,[91] In these illuminations, the saturation of figurative and nonfigurative motifs decorating the surface paradoxically intensifies its immateriality. In the Sinai *Homiliae*, densely ornamented frames are continually used for accentuating the timelessness of the episodes depicted in the miniatures[92]. In the second place, abstract ornamentality creates liminal spaces within manuscripts. Factual and virtual realities, that is, the visible and the invisible worlds, are connected by means of decorated images. Their purpose was to represent the intangible while unsuccessfully striving to evade the boundaries

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tu deus in omnibus; fol. 18[R], *Benedictam Asscriptam ... uenerabiles manus*; fol. 18[V], *suas, item tibi gratia agens benedixit ... et calicem salutis perpetue*; fol. 19[R], *Supra que propitio ... omni benedictione*; fol. 19[V], (ce)*lesti et gratia repleamur ... et cum omnibus sanctis tuis*; fol. 20[R], (*Intra*) *quorum nos consortium ...* [*Pater noster...*] *Sicut et nos dimitti//*; fol. 20[V], *//mus debitoribus nostris ... per omnia secula seculorum. Amen.*

87 See C. VALLE. *Woven Words...*, pp. 34-36; A. BÜCHELER. *Ornament as Argument: Textile Pages and Textile Metaphors in Medieval German Manuscripts (800-1100)*. PhD dissertation. University of Toronto, 2014, pp. 70-161.

88 Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, Ross.251 (alt. Ross.gr.251). Parchment, 277 folios, dimensions unknown.

89 See H. L. KESSLER. "Configuring the Invisible by Copying the Holy Face" in *Spiritual Seeing...*, pp. 64-87, p. 83; M. GUSCIN. *The Image of Edessa*. Brill: Leiden; Boston (MA), 2009, p. 194; A. NICOLOTTI. *From the Mandylion of Edessa to the Shroud of Turin: The Metamorphosis and Manipulation of a Legend*. Brill: Leiden; Boston (MA), 2014, pp. 139-140.

90 Sinai, Dayr al-Qiddīsah Kātrīn/Monē tēs Hagias Aikaterinēs, cod. gr. 339. Parchment, length unknown, dimensions unknown.

91 See J. C. ANDERSON, "The Illustration of Cod. Sinai. Gr. 339" in *The Art Bulletin*. 61/2 (1979), pp. 167–185. Available in https://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.1979.10787656.

92 J. C. ANDERSON, "The Illustration of Cod. Sinai. Gr. 339" pp. 170-173.

of perceptible things. As a result of this phenomenon, artificers make explicit the sensitive nature of pictures. When discussing the *Te igitur* page (fol. 16R)[93] of the sacramentary, Frese offered an interesting parallel, making a comparison between the illumination and a metallic gridded screen[94]. This analogy is truly appropriate inasmuch as visibility and invisibility are clearly captured. Eriugena's work certainly was crucial with respect to the apophatic topics referred to above. As Henry Mayr-Harting has indicated, his translation of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* had a great impact upon the development of Western European civilisation even four centuries after its composition[95]. One long but evocative passage in the *Periphyseon* abridges Eriugena's negative theology and makes palpable Pseudo Dionysius' inescapable influence:

> Deus dicitur, sed non proprie Deus est; uisioni enim caecitas opponitur, et uidenti non uidens: igitur ὑπερθεός, plusquam uidens, si Θεός uidens interpretatur. Sed si ad aliam originem huius nominis recurras, ita ut non a uerbo θεωρῶ, uideo, sed a uerbo Θέω, id est curro, Θεόν, Deum, deriuari intelligas, adest tibi similiter eadem ratio. Nam currenti non currens opponitur, sicut tarditas celeritati. Erit igitur ὑπερθεός, id est, plusquam currens, sicut scriptum est; Velociter currit sermo eius. Nam hoc de Deo uerbo, quod ineffabiliter per omnia, quae sunt, ut sint, currit, intelligimus. Eodem modo de ueritate accipere debemus. Veritati etenim falsitas opponitur, ac per hoc proprie ueritas non est; ὑπεραληθής igitur est, et ὑπεραλήθεια, plusquam uerus, et plusquam ueritas. Eadem ratio in omnibus diuinis nominibus observanda est. Non enim proprie dicitur aeternitas, quoniam aeternitati temporalitas opponitur; ὑπεραιώνιος igitur est, et ὑπεραιωνία, plusquam aeternus, et plusquam aeternitas[96].

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93 See note 183.

94 T. FRESE. "„Kommt und seht den Ort'…" p. 51. In Kessler's appealing analysis of abstraction and grids in the Basilica di San Marco, in Venice, these objects and motifs also functioned as thresholds that separated mundane reality from heavenly reality; H. L. KESSLER. "Response: Astral Abstraction" in E. GERTSMAN (ed.) *Abstraction in Medieval Art…*, pp. 329-354, pp. 331ff.

95 H. MAYR-HARTING. *Ottonian Book Illumination: An Historical Study I*. Harvey Miller: London, 1999, pp. 126-127. See also J. D. McGEE, "Reflections of the Thought of John Scotus Erigena in Some Carolingian and Ottonian Illuminations" in *Mediaevistik. 1* (1988), pp. 125-143; J. O'DRISCOLL, "Visual Vortex: An Epigraphic Image from an Ottonian Gospel Book" in *Word & Image. 27/3* (2011), pp. 309-321, pp. 318-321. Available in https://doi.org/10.1080/02666286.2011.541625.

96 *Periph*. I.14.11-17 (PL 122, col. 459D-460B): "He is called God, but He is not strictly speaking God: for to vision is opposed blindness, and to him who sees he who does not see. Therefore He is ὑπερθεός that is, more-than-God — for Θεός is interpreted "He Who sees." But if you have recourse to the alternative origin of this name, so that you understand Θεός, that is, God, to be

Conclusion

The central Middle Ages witnessed profound debates and multicultural exchanges, both intellectual and visual, around sacred images and their legitimacy. These connections, which I have described as rhizomatic — i.e., non-organic, multidimensional, interdependent — brought into dialogue Eastern and Western civilisations from the end of the seventh to the beginning of the eleventh century. That being so, Islamic, Jewish, Byzantine, Anglo-Saxon, Carolingian, and Ottonian cultures were asynchronically interrelated from different perspectives. One of these was apophatic spirituality, which was widely disseminated across the medieval world. Abstract and quasi-abstract ornamentality was an iconographic resource intensely aroused in symbolic terms and which helped medieval artificers to stress the ineffability of the divine. These unapproachable images, such as those in the Vatican *Topographia christiana*, the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Codex Aureus of Saint-Emmeram, and the Sacramentary of Henry II, shared a semiotic articulation whose purpose was to obstruct the immediate emergence of signification or, in other words, the *presentification of meaning*.

When influenced by the *via negativa*, ornamentality had an undecidable quality that allowed the destabilisation or even the undermining of signification itself. In Derridean deconstruction, undecidability becomes a subversive strategy for dislocating the traditional binary oppositions of Westerns metaphysics while producing semantic indeterminacy[97]. This semiotic movement puts into question

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derived not from the verb θεωρῶ, that is, "I see," but from the verb Θέω, that is, "I run," the same reason confronts you. For to him who runs he who does not run is opposed, as slowness to speed. Therefore He will be ὑπερθεός, that is, more-than-running, as it is written: "His Word runneth swiftly": for we understand this to refer to God the Word, Who in an ineffable way runs through all things that are, in order that they may be. We ought to think in the same way concerning Truth: for to truth is opposed falsehood, and therefore strictly speaking He is not truth. Therefore He is ὑπεραληθής and ὑπεραλήθεια, that is, more-than-true and (more than-)truth. The same reason must be observed in all the Divine Names. For He is not called Eternity properly, since to eternity is opposed temporality. Therefore He is ὑπεραιώνιος and ὑπεραιωνία, that is, more-than-eternal and (more-than-)eternity." (trans. in IOANNES SCOTUS ERIUGENA, *Periphyseon...*, p. 47.).

97 Jacques Derrida offered an eloquent example of deconstructive undecidability when dealing with the notion of φάρμακον: "La traduction courante de *pharmakon* par *remède* — drogue bienfaisante — n'est certes pas inexacte. Non seulement *pharmakon* pouvait vouloir dire remède et effacer, à une certaine surface de son fonctionnement, l'ambiguïté de son sens. Mais il est même évident que, l'intention déclarée de Theuth étant de faire valoir son produit, il *fait tourner* le mot autour de son étrange et invisible pivot, et le présente sous un seul, le plus rassurant, de ses *pôles*. Cette médecine est bénéfique, elle produit et répare, accumule et remédie, augmente le savoir et réduit l'oubli. Néanmoins la traduction par « remède » efface, par la sortie hors de la langue grecque, l'autre pôle réservé dans le mot *pharmakon*. Elle annule la ressource d'ambiguïté et rend plus difficile, sinon impossible, l'intelligence du contexte. A la différence de « drogue » et même de « médecine », *remède* dit la rationalité transparente de la science, de la technique et de la causalité thérapeutique, excluant ainsi du texte l'appel à la vertu magique d'une force dont

the idea of a transcendent sign and how — or if at all — it can be represented. As in the *via negativa* God, who is the original signifier in this context, is beyond presence and absence and therefore is beyond comprehension, representation is inevitably deficient and its only viable movement is that of what Derrida terms as *différance*. The *intersubjective apophatic imagination* and *apophatic understanding* respond to these epistemic operations. Hence, I dare to suggest, taking into account the deferring manoeuvres of apophatic theology[98], that ornamentality in the

on maîtrise mal les effets, d'une dynamis toujours surprenante pour qui la voudrait manier en maître et sujet."; J. DERRIDA, *La dissémination*. Seuil: Paris, 1972, pp. 109-110.

98 The bibliography on the subject is immense. Among others see M. C. TAYLOR. *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*. The Chicago University Press: Chicago (IL); London, 1984; K. HART. *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1989; I. BULHOF. "Open zijn als een vorm van negatieve theologie: over Derrida" in I. BULHOF – L. TEN KATEN (ed.) *Ons ontbreken heilige namen: Negatieve theologie in de hedendaagse cultuurfilosofie*. Kok Agora: Kampen, 1992, pp. 91-124; several essays in H. COWARD – T. FOSHAY (ed.). *Derrida and Negative Theology*. State University of New York Press: Albany (NY), 1992; J. DERRIDA. *Sauf le nom*. Galilée: París, 1993; A. L. DUGDALE, *Silent Prayers: Derridean Negativity and Negative Theology*. MA dissertation. McGill University, Montréal, 1993; M. C. TAYLOR. *Nots*. Chicago (IL); The Chicago University Press: London, 1993; G. WARD, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1995; B. BLANS, "Negative Theology and Deconstruction on Pseudo-Dionysius and Derrida" in *Bijdragen*. 57/1 (1996), pp. 2-19; J. D. CAPUTO. *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington (IN); Indianapolis (IN), 1997; J. A. Irwin. *Reviving An Ancient-Modern Quarrel: A Critique of Derrida's Reading of Plato and Platonism*. PhD dissertation. University of Warwick, Coventry, 1997; S. WOLOSKY, "An 'Other' Negative Theology: On Derrida's 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials'" in *Poetics Today*. 19/2 (1998), pp. 261-280. Available in https://doi.org/10.2307/1773442; T. A. CARLSON. *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God*. London: The Chicago University Press: Chicago (IL), 1999; J.L. MARION, "Au nom : comment ne pas parler de « théologie négative »" in *Langage apophatique*. 55/3 (1999), pp. 339-363. Available in https://doi.org/10.7202/401250ar; F. NAULT, "Déconstruction et apophatisme: à propos d'une denegation Jacques Derrida" in *Laval théologique et philosophique*. 55/3 (1999), pp. 393-411; F. NAULT. *Derrida et la théologie : dire Dieu après la déconstruction*. Médiaspaul: Montréal; Cerf: París, 2000; L. FERRETTER, "How to Avoid Speaking of the Other: Derrida, Dionysius and the Problematic of Negative Theology" in *Paragraph*. 21/1 (2001), pp. 50-65; R. HORNER. *Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology*. Fordham University Press: New York (NY), 2001; J. DERRIDA. "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials" *in Psyche: Inventions of the Other*. Stanford University Press: Stanford (CA), 2003, 2, pp. 143-195; A. BRADLEY. *Negative Theology and Modern French Philosophy*. Routledge: London; New York (NY), 2004; several essays in O. DAVIES – D. TURNER (ed.). *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2004; S. GERSH, *Neoplatonism After Derrida: Parallelograms*. Brill: Leiden; Boston (MA), 2006; M. HÄGGLUND. *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*. Stanford University Press: Stanford (CA), 2008; M.-J. RUBENSTEIN. "Dionysius, Derrida, and the Critique of 'Ontotheology'" in S. COAKLEY – C. M. STANG (ed.) *Re-thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*. Blackwell: Malden (MA); Oxford, 2009; S. SHAKESPEARE. *Derrida and Theology*. T&T Clark: London; New York (NY), 2009; S. GERSH. "Negative Theology and Conversion: Derrida's Neoplatonic Compulsions" in M. LEONARD (ed.) *Derrida and Antiquity*. Oxford University Press: Oxford; New York (NY), 2010, pp. 101-132; several essays in E. BUGYS – D. NEWHEISER (ed.). *Desire, Faith, and the Darkness of God: Essays in Honor of Denys Turner*. University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame (IN), 2015; several essays in D. LEWIN – S. D. PODMORE – D. WILLIAMS (ed.). *Mystical Theology and Continental Philosophy: Interchange in the Wake of God*. Routledge: London; New York (NY), 2017; H. RAYMENT-PICKARD. *Impossible God: Derrida's Theology*. Routledge: Abingdon; New York (NY), 2018; D. NEWHEISER. *Hope in a Secular Age: Deconstruction, Negative Theology and the Future of Faith*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2019; A. DE ROCHECHOUART, "The (Im)possibility of God's Name. Levinas, Derrida, Marion" in *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*. 76/2-3 (2020), pp. 639-660.

images that I have discussed implies the impossibility of an attainable meaning. Abstract and quasi-abstract designs, then, work as visual devices for avoiding representation as a paradoxical affirmation of God's ultimate unknowability to human intellection.