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PART TWO

Chapter Seven Hildegard of Bingen's Visionary Circles

7.1 The Context of Hildegard's Visions

Hildegard of Bingen is an incredible personality by today's standards, which must have been even more the case by the standards of her own time and culture. So inspiring is her life, and voluminous her often controversial work, that knowing where to start its analysis is almost as challenging as realising when to stop. Given that it is the circular content of her visions which are of special interest to this chapter, it would be beneficial to the appreciation of their message to precede their description with an account of the context in which they occurred.

Born in Germany in 1098, the youngest of ten children, and daughter of a knight, Hildegard began to have visions at the age of six (Hozeski, 1994:xi). Her care and education were placed in the hands of the Church two years later, and she took on the monastic habit of her own volition at fifteen years of age. In 1136 she became Abbess of the Benedictine community of St Disibod in which she had been raised, went on to found her own convent in Bingen, and died as its abbess in 1179.

The independence displayed in leaving the male community of St Disibod to found a new convent of nuns is unusual for the average medieval woman. Indeed, in an age and culture in which women were considered to be inferior to men (Fox, 1985), it was uncommon for a woman to be allowed an authoritative voice and role. In this respect, her visions and her "chronic ill health" (Newman, 1990:11) seem to have been instrumental in gaining her permission to achieve her goals. Firstly, being a weak or frail female may well have been less threatening to medieval Catholic male authority than would a strong and healthy woman. Secondly, her inspiration to leave the community at St Disibod is attributed to one of her visions which, by then, had already

been granted papal approval. These two factors worked in synthesis, with the result that Hildegard got the independent convent she wanted, as Newman (1990) asserts that

... she persevered, using her family connections to secure the land and a miraculous 'charismatic illness' to persuade the abbot that her departure was the will of God. (Newman, 1990:13)

Though she describes herself as humble and meek prior to the documentation of her visions, her life's work subsequent to this point demonstrates the opposite. Hildegard's written works include the earliest known medical dictionary, a physical treatise, the biographies of Saints Disibod and Rupert, three books explaining theological and scriptural subjects, and approximately seventy choral works. To this she adds numerous letters to members of the clergy as high in rank as the Pope as well as to princes, kings and emperors (Hozeski, 1995).

It is her three visionary works which are of central importance to this chapter, which are *Scivias*, which is short for "*Scito vias Domini*, or *Know the Ways of the Lord*," (Newman, 1990:22, original italics) *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, which translates as "The Book of the Rewards of Life," (Hozeski, 1994:xiii) or "The Book of Life's Merits," (Fox, 1987:xiii) and a third, which is called either *De operatione Dei* or *Liber Divinorum Operum Simplicis Hominis*, depending on the modern editor. These translate as "The Book of Divine Works" (Fox, 1987:xi) and "The Book of the Divine Works of a Simple Person" (Hozeski, 1994:xiii) respectively. The first was written over a ten year period from 1141 to 1151, the second from 1158 to 1163, and the third from 1163 to 1173.

These three texts record and illustrate Hildegard's mystic visions. Their description as illuminations refers not only to the style of illuminated manuscript, but also signifies that the intended purpose of making them available to others was to shed

light on biblical stories, theological and theosophical concepts, and thereby increase the strength of faith of Hildegard's contemporaries. As has already been established, this does not encompass the full extent of Hildegard's visions, since it is known that her visions began at the age of six and prompted her to found a separate convent.

The rationale for this discrimination regarding which visions to share and which not to make public can be attributed to two influential factors. Firstly there are Hildegard's reasons for not sharing her other visions, and secondly, there is the reason she gives for sharing those within the three published manuscripts. One of the possible reasons for not sharing earlier visions is that she did not immediately understand them. As Newman (1990) explains,

It took decades of painfully acquired self-knowledge – and the authority of an abbatial position – before she was able to understand the visions as a vehicle for divine revelation.

(Newman, 1990:12)

The incomprehension of visions until experience teaches a means of unravelling their mysteries is certainly a plausible one, and is a reality described in the present day to this author by people who are what could be described as clairvoyant (literally meaning *clear seeing*). In Newman's (1990) discussion of what little is known about Hildegard's early visions, she asserts that because they were "merely baffling," (Newman, 1990:11) Hildegard confided them only with Jutta; the Abbess who brought her up, and also with her teacher and secretary, Volmar.

The reasons given by Hildegard in *Scivias* for not making those specific visions public sooner speak of self doubt and the fear of what people might think and say about her and the visions. To this end she states that she

... refused to write them because of doubt and evil opinion and because of the diversity of other people's words ... (Hozeski, 1995:3).

Newman (1990) confirms the basis of such fears as real within the medieval Catholic life of Hildegard, just as they would be likely to be in today's world. She highlights the importance of the papal approval of Hildegard's visions which followed the commencement of her documentation of *Scivias*, which authorised her to "write whatever the Holy Spirit inspired her to write" (Hozeski, xxv). Newman (1990) places this in context, asserting that this gave her more confidence to share her visions, and

... authenticated her publicly and protected her from the censure she was bound to attract for violating the deuterio-Pauline strictures on female silence and submission. (Newman, 1990:13)

With two reasons of such considerable gravity preventing her from disclosing earlier visions, her conviction that she must share the visions of *Scivias*, *Liber Vitae Meritorum* and *De operatione Dei* is emphasised by the exclusion of all others. The reason provided by Hildegard in justification of this incomplete disclosure is the perceived source of her visions and their explanation. As explained in Chapter Five, she felt that the visions were a gift from God, and that their meanings were made clear by a divine voice. The conclusion one may draw from this is that her other visions were either not perceived to be from God, or that she was not instructed with as persuasive a divine force to make her share them. Hildegard certainly did not consider them to be as important, and this fact has to be respected. As is clear from the rest of her life's work, she surely would have made them public had she believed that they were of significance.

7.2

Healing and Hildegard's Visions

Prior to embarking upon an analysis of the content of Hildegard's visions for fresh insight into why the circle is so commonly associated with spiritual healing, the existing commentary regarding healing and Hildegard's visions must not only be acknowledged, but analysed in terms of direction. The majority of the available documented comments relate to Hildegard's health directly, and are presented here as a preface to the examination of the content of her visions from a different perspective.

Firstly comes Hildegard's own documentation of her health in relationship to her visions. She is described as having been "A sickly child," (Hozeski, 1995:xxv) and her proneness to ill health continued into adulthood. Hildegard attributes this chronic ill health to "a peculiar temperament," (Newman, 1990:11) which Hildegard also links to her propensity for visionary experiences. She commences *Scivias* with her own perception of the effect of the visions and their documentation on her health, stating that she was unwell for a long time, that she experienced a variety of illnesses until she started recording the visions, and at this point she immediately recovered her health and strength.

In her introduction to *Liber Vitae Meritorum* she attempts to place the book's visions in the historical context of her life, leaving some confusion regarding which of her experiences she is referring to and when. In what could be a reference to either the period of time following the documentation of *Scivias*, or the period of time after she had experienced the visions but not yet recorded them, Hildegard states that she

... had been physically sick and weighed down with a lot of work for nine years after the true vision had shown me these things so that I might explain them. (Hozeski, 1994:9)

She then goes on to describe the vision which led to *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, which she notes as occurring when she was sixty years old, and commenced its documentation in the following year when she was sixty one. It is then the introduction to her third and final visionary work, *De operatione Dei* which contains Hildegard's account of her health whilst she wrote the second work. The seven years of writing which Hildegard employs as a chronological indicator suggest that it is *Liber Vitae Meritorum* which is most likely to be the work during which she claims to have "trembled over my whole body and began to fall ill because of my bodily weakness" (Fox, 1987:5).

Hildegard twice states that she laboured over or was troubled by this vision for five years, in her introductions to *Liber Vitae Meritorum* and *De operatione Dei*. The reasons for believing that the seven years refer to the completion of her second visionary work and not her third are twofold. The first is a matter of the dates given for the completion of *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, which Hildegard states as commencing in vision form when she was sixty; a year before she began writing it in 1158 (Hozeski, 1994). When this is applied to the dates agreed upon by Fox (1987), Hozeski (1994), Maddocks (2001) and Flanagan (1989) for the work's publication, this means that the vision commenced in 1157 and its documentation ceased in 1163, which totals seven years. This compares with the ten or eleven years agreed upon by the same academic community for the completion of *De operatione Dei*.

The second piece of evidence supporting this chronology is the first speech of the divine voice which commences the visions of Hildegard's third work. Clearly referring to Hildegard's past, this voice is placed as being heard in 1163. This divine voice which she quotes refers to her ill health, and describes Hildegard as having been "thoroughly seared, so to speak, by countless grave sufferings of the body," (Fox,

1987:5) though the same voice does not give her permission to take time off to recover, instead urging her to persevere with the documentation of the visions of *De operatione Dei*. At the age of sixty-five, Hildegard thus embarks upon the production of this work, which she wrote “with a trembling hand, even though I was shaken by countless illnesses,” (Fox, 1987:6) and died in old age six years after its completion.

There is thus no consistent pattern linking Hildegard’s visions with her health, as it is only the preface to *Scivias* in which Hildegard associates the visions with her own personal physical healing. This relationship has been commented upon by others in recent times. Apart from possible loss of recorded medieval opinions, the lack of such comment from Hildegard’s contemporaries may perhaps be due to the fact that she was the local expert on health and healing, demonstrated in the publication of her medical encyclopaedia, and supported by accounts of her informal practice of medicine. Hozeski (1994) describes a situation in which “large numbers of sick and suffering persons were brought to her for cures,” (Hozeski, 1994:xiv-xv) which is supported by Newman (1990), who notes that “A tradition of miraculous healings” is ascribed to Hildegard. For a monastic to perform a healing role in the Middle Ages was, as discussed in Chapter Five, a common occurrence.

Of the more recent comments on the relationship between Hildegard’s visions and health, a purely scientific response to her visions can be found in the form of Sacks’ (1985) twentieth century diagnosis of Hildegard’s spiritual experiences as the symptoms of migraine. His theory suggests that, whilst there is a distinct link between her physical health and visions, it is not one of healing. Nevertheless this need not contradict Hildegard’s beliefs regarding their source. If she did indeed experience the visions as a result of migraine, then it remains possible and consistent with her beliefs, that she

might have suffered from migraines according to the will of God as the corollary of being able to receive the visions.

This entirely physical suggestion of the basis of her visions leads this author to propose another. The high electromagnetic energy source measured in the present day in Hildegard's cell (Fox, 1985) would not only be sufficient but also almost bound to lead to chronic ill health, according to Fife (1998). Based on the enhanced spiritual experiences described by Braden (1997) in correlation with a lowering of environmental magnetic fields, Hildegard's visions might be the result of the change in electromagnetic frequencies experienced whenever she left her cell. Her own avowal that her visions occurred during full waking consciousness and definitely not in any state close to sleep supports this theory.

This also allows for the visions to be spiritual experiences despite the theory's origin of a scientific perspective. Yet it is the unknown details of Hildegard's life which threaten the theory's credibility, since the electromagnetic fields in Hildegard's home at the age of six are not known, her precise location at the time of each vision are not known, and her visionary experiences remained consistent despite her move from St Disibod's to St Rupert's, with no current data against which to compare the medieval electromagnetic fields of the first location with those of the second.

Fox's (1985) opinion of the relationship between Hildegard's health and visions notes Hildegard's ascription of a healing effect to the documentation of *Scivias*, and postulates that the creative process *per se* is responsible for Hildegard's healing. He invites the reader to

Notice that her strength returned while writing her book, that is
'in the process of' self-expression – it was not the product, a

book completed ten years later that healed her – it was the ‘process’ of art as meditation. (Fox, 1985:27)

Whilst Fox (1985) certainly draws the reader’s attention to the common mandala form in Hildegard’s visions, his statements regarding the relationship between Hildegard’s visions and health make no mention of their circular form. For his theory to be suitable, a similar case should apply to the creative processes of *Liber Vitae Meritorum* and *De operatione Dei*, whereas, by her own accounts, Hildegard was greatly troubled with ill health throughout her documentation of *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, and associates what she describes as countless illnesses with the creation of *De operatione Dei*, which, in fairness to Fox (1985), may also be due to her not inconsiderable age by that time. Eighty-one years exceeds the average medieval life expectancy considerably as, indeed, it does to this day.

Fox (1985) does, however, provide a comment relating her visions to healing in general, as opposed to Hildegard’s health in particular. In elaboration of his citation in 2.3, Fox (1985) asserts that Hildegard

... awakens the psyche to the cosmos and thereby offers healing to both. ... She illumines us today more than she illumined or dreamed of illuminating anyone in her own time. She gifts us with her illuminations. (Fox: 1985:20)

This leads to the exploration of her visions here, in order to probe Hildegard’s illumination on the subject of why the circle is so commonly associated with spiritual healing, not because she was necessarily healed by them, but because of their shape, source and context.

The three books shall be explored here in chronological order, and their visions in the order of presentation. Due to the location of the early manuscripts, combined with

their Latin text, modern translations of the visions into English will necessarily be the sources consulted. To date, it is *Scivias* which presents a choice of two translations, each with different translation philosophies. Bishop (1990) admits to alteration of the original, maintaining that her efforts result in a text which is a faithful representation of the original Latin meaning, yet admitting that the translation is “somewhat less literal to make it read better in English” (Bishop, 1990:56). The methodology of the alternative translator is to remain as true to Hildegard’s original meaning and style as is possible, resulting in an English translation that is “reasonably readable” (Hozeski, 1994:vii).

Whilst this version admittedly edits out “material which is irrelevant or difficult to comprehend today,” (Clow, 1995:vii) its aim of including any section of Hildegard’s original text which “contained even one line describing one of these visions ...” (Clow, 1995:viii) makes it the translation of preference, since it is the exact attributions of the circles in Hildegard’s visions which is sought, and not a version adapted for greater modern readability. In the event that Hozeski’s (1995) translation edits out the mention of a circle and its attribution, the Hart and Bishop (1990) translation will be the version of choice.

7.3 Overview of the Circle’s Presence in Hildegard’s Visions

The dual format of Hildegard’s visions allows two possibilities for the circle to appear in each vision; in the text and/or in the illustration. The images and accompanying descriptive text are inextricably intertwined. What is described in the text may not be evident in the illustration and vice versa, and hence the two formats cannot be separated in this exploration of their content.

The dominance of the circle in Hildegard’s visions is evident in the ratio of illuminations which include a circle to those which do not. In *Scivias*, nineteen of the twenty-six visions contain a circle either in the illustration, the text, or both. This leaves

just seven which do not contain reference to the shape. *Liber Vitae Meritorum* is not divided into separate visions by Hildegard, so is read as a single vision which contains several references to circles. *De operatione Dei* is comprised of ten visions, of which eight contain a circle in the image, text, or both.

In the following two chapters, the circles in the images and texts of Hildegard's visions will be documented together with their contextual attributions. This will commence with the visions of *Scivias*, which warrants a chapter of its own due to its scale. The vision of *Liber Vitae Meritorum* will be addressed in Chapter Nine, along with those of *De operatione Dei*, which combine to form a body of work comparable to *Scivias* in volume. The nine visions which do not contain reference to a circle in either the text or illustration are not documented as they are unlikely to yield any insight into the shape's association with spiritual healing, but are identified in sequential order within the text of Chapters Eight and Nine.

Chapter Eight The Circle's Attributions in *Scivias*

8.1 The First Part of *Scivias*

Scivias is divided into three sections called the First, Second and Third Parts respectively and entirely logically. Hildegard named each vision by consecutive numbers, and these are accompanied here by descriptive titles from the current author for ease of identification. Since the first two visions of the First Part contain neither a visual representation of a circle in the illustration nor any reference to a circle in the description of the vision, the exploration of the circle's attributions within the visions therefore commences with the Third Vision of the First Part.

8.1.1 Third Vision; God as a Cosmic Egg

The Third Vision of the First Part, shown in Plate 8.1.1.1, depicts Hildegard's vision of the universe, shaped like an egg. She makes careful note of this ovoid shape, yet continues steadfastly to describe it as a round or circular object, which an egg is from its top or bottom viewpoint. Within the egg there are several spheres and, between them, they convey several profound meanings.

The overall shape of the egg, which is described by Hildegard as being a "very large, round and shady object" (Hozeski, 1995:28) is attributed the utmost significance by Hildegard in her explanation of the vision. Her belief or understanding of this vision is that the egg

... shows faithfully the all-powerful God incomprehensible in majesty and inestimable in divine mysteries and existing as the hope of all the faithful. (Hozeski, 1995:28-29)

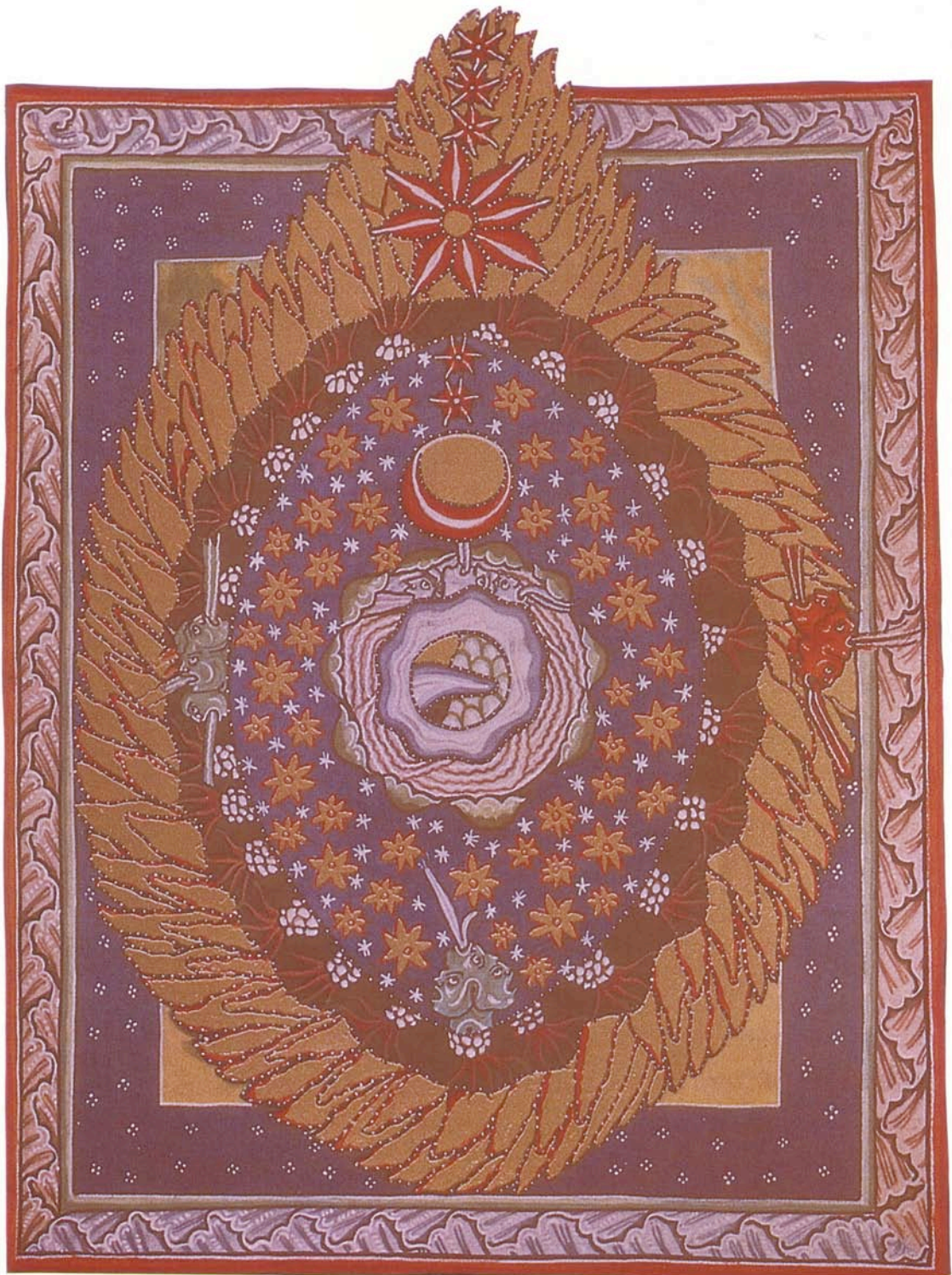


Plate 8.1.1.1: *The Third Vision of the First Part of Scivias* (1141-1151)

Hildegard of Bingen

Mixed media on paper

(Fox, 1985:34)

It seems unlikely, even at this early stage, that the circle could be attributed any property of greater importance in one of Hildegard's visions. In a search for an answer to the question of why it is circles which are attributed healing properties the world over, it is certainly an encouraging example with which to start an exploration of a previously unexplored instance of the circle's psychic occurrence.

The first of the spheres within this egg, described and explained by Hildegard, is "a globe of reddish fire," whose brightness was "so great that it lit up the entire inside of the circular object" (Hozeski, 1995:29). Again, Hildegard describes the egg, which represents the all powerful God, as circular. This globe of reddish fire is attributed similarly divine properties, as Hildegard explains that

The splendor of this brightness shows why in God the Father the Only-Begotten is unutterable, *the son of justice* who has the light of burning love. The Son exists in such glory that every creature is illuminated by the brightness of the Word's light.
(Hozeski, 1995:29)

The movement of this globe within the egg is then explained in terms of the timing of Jesus' life on earth, as well as general details of his life such as the suffering he endured, making the visual impact created by this personification of "the Word of God" (Hozeski, 1995:30) as the form of a sphere all the stronger.

The third circle to be described and explained in this vision is, in fact, the same globe of reddish fire, but attributed a further association. It is clearly identifiable as the same globe by the three torches located above it, which are the only three torches in the vision. As Hildegard addresses this globe's representation for a second time, she clarifies its placement as being within "the purest of air" (Hozeski, 1995:32). Here the subtleties of the original Latin make their presence felt by the apparent inadequacy of

English as a vehicle for translation, as the very large globe of reddish fire is explained as being a true representation of “the unconquered church which is shining white in the innocent brightness of faith” (Hozeski,1995:32).

Now the relationship between the globe of reddish fire shining white and the purest of air becomes apparent, as within this air are “many clear spheres everywhere” (Hozeski, 1995:32). The globe of reddish fire shines its brightness onto these spheres, and from time to time sends its fire out to them. Hildegard explains that the many clear spheres are works of piety, and that the pure air is the purity of faith. It is through these “many and splendid works of piety,” everywhere in the purity of faith that “the church brings forth its miracles” (Hozeski, 1995:33). This shows the circle as associated with faith and miracles, in addition to God, Jesus and the Church all in the same image.

There is one more sphere to be described within this vision, which is a “dry globe of a very large size” (Hozeski, 1995:34). It is positioned amidst various kinds of air, which hold it in position and prevent it from moving. The significance of this circular form is harder to comprehend than those preceding it, as Hildegard explains that

This clearly shows that among the strong creatures of God there is a person of deep thought who has been made *from the slime of the earth. (Genesis 2:7)* This person is so covered with the virtues that the person cannot be separated from them in any way. (Hozeski, 1995:34)

After a generic reference to another two circles in the forms of a purple and gold crown by which God is known, and the crown of thorns on the head of Jesus, Hildegard returns to this dry globe held in position by various kinds of air. Like the globe of reddish fire, it takes on a second meaning in Hildegard’s description. This time, the

various kinds of air shake with the wind, which between them “make this dry globe move a little with their strength” (Hozeski, 1995:35). Returning to the association of the circle with God and miracles, this globe unites the two, as Hildegard informs the reader that the globe’s slight movement in the air and wind

... signifies that at the proper time the creatures of God embrace the fame of the miracles of the one who created them. As a result, miracle is woven to miracle with the great thundering of words. A person struck by the greatness of miracles shakes in mind and body, and when the person has been stunned by this shaking, the person then thinks about his or her own weakness. (Hozeski, 1995:35)

Whether the dry globe represents the miracles of God or the people shaken by them is not entirely clear, yet the essence of the message is that, which ever of the two it is, they are strongly connected to each other. As this concludes the circle’s associations in the Third Vision of the First Part of *Scivias*, the reader may begin to estimate the potential significance of the circle in the rest of the visions shared by Hildegard.

8.1.2 Fourth Vision; The Soul as a Sphere

The Fourth Vision of the First Part, illustrated in Plate 8.1.2.1, received a brief mention in Chapter Five. In this vision, there is no circle apparent in the illustration. Given the dynamic nature of the sphere which is discussed in this vision, the problems presented by its accurate depiction within medieval style and media is sufficient to account for its pictorial absence.



Plate 8.1.2.1: *The Fourth Vision of the First Part of Scivias*, (1141-1151)

Hildegard of Bingen

Mixed media on paper

(Fox, 1985:54)

Hildegard commences the vision's visual description with a "very great and peaceful brightness," which "had a lot of eyes in it," (Hozeski, 1995:39) and four corners marking the cardinal points. This is explained within the vision's visual description, which differs from Hildegard's habit of providing an explanation after the image's description. She states that this brightness indicates "the mystery of the heavenly creator" (Hozeski, 1995:39), and contained another brightness within it. This second brightness within the first signifies that "the knowledge of God has the Only-Begotten of God in itself" (Hozeski, 1995:45).

These details are necessary to understand the burning sphere which suddenly appears in the vision's description. The second brightness "set itself in motion with the movement of life," (Hozeski, 1995:50) which relates to the way God has arranged life so that an unborn baby receives a spirit at the correct time and therefore moves its body. After this clarification of the brightness coming from God and representing the soul, it is described as being a burning sphere, which

... did not have the outline of a human body in it, but it did possess a heart. This signifies that the soul, burning with the fire of understanding, comprehends various things in its understanding. (Hozeski, 1995:50)

The soul's form as a sphere, rather than being the shape of a person, but possessing a heart, is explained by Hildegard as symbolising that though it is not physical, the soul provides comfort for the heart, and "serves as the foundation of the body and rules the entire body" (Hozeski, 1995:50). Once it had been set in motion and given life to the foetus, the burning sphere

... touched the mind of the complete person in the woman's womb. This means that the soul has not only earthly but also heavenly powers when it knows God wisely. (Hozeski, 1995:50)

The soul is therefore described as a sphere, and attributed the ability to possess heavenly powers under certain circumstances related to the divine.

Hildegard's account of the soul's relationship with the body continues, and the burning sphere is thus described as pouring itself throughout the limbs of the person, which simply means that it is the soul which gives life to the person. Hildegard's subsequent statements indicate that she believed that the soul enters the foetus immediately prior to birth, and that it is this event which causes the baby to be born.

The many storms which attempt to attack the sphere (see brief discussion in Chapter Five), represent "the many snares of the devil trying to entice the soul to sinning" (Hozeski, 1995:56). The sphere, as discussed earlier, is too strong for the storms, since it guards itself with "heavenly inspiration" (Hozeski, 1995:56). Later in the explanation of the vision, Hildegard makes a rare addition to the vision's visual description, describing another sphere "drawing itself together out of the lines of its form and loosening its knots," (Hozeski, 1995:57) which represents the soul untying itself from the physical body at the end of the body's life. This shows the soul to continue existing in spherical form after the death of the body.

8.1.3 Fifth Vision; Mother Church Crowned in Glory

The Fifth Vision of the First Part contains comparatively few mentions of circles. The entire circle of the earth is referred to in reference to the area in which the apostles spread their teachings, and the only circle which features in the visual

description of the vision is a circle resembling the dawn on the head of the vision's dominating female figure, shown in Plate 8.1.3.1²⁰.

This towering woman represents “synagogue, the mother of the incarnation of the Word of God” (Hozeski, 1995:59). The circle which resembled the dawn on her head signifies that

... she revealed beforehand the miracle of the incarnation of the Only-Begotten of God, and she predicted the virtues and mysteries which were to follow. For she was crowned gloriously on her first morning when she received the commands of the divinity. (Hozeski, 1995:62)

The circle here is not attributed specific properties or qualities but, in its form as a crown, indicates the honour of accepting and adhering to the will of God. It also links the circle with miracles once again.

8.1.4 Sixth Vision; The Angels Arranged in Crowns

The significance of the crown as a circular form is greatly enhanced in the Sixth Vision of the First Part. This is illustrated in Plate 2.3.1 of Chapter Two as visual evidence of the circle's presence and importance to Hildegard's visions. It depicts the nine choirs of angels, as seen by Hildegard in her vision, which form their ranks into nine concentric circles. Each choir of angels is described as an army, and they arrange themselves in circular form “as if they were a crown” (Hozeski, 1995:69). Hozeski's (1995) translation makes a slight nonsense of the vision's illustration, as the armies are described in the reverse order of their presentation in the image. Bishop and Hart (1990) and Fox (1985) each reword the translation to correspond with the visual structure

²⁰ As explained in Chapter Five, Hildegard is the recognised artist of this vision. The source of this illustration attributes authorship of the monochrome copy to a second artist, who is here acknowledged after Hildegard. The media cited is that of Hildegard's original. This shall apply whenever it occurs throughout this thesis.



Plate 8.1.3.1: *The Fifth Vision of the First Part of Scivias*, (1141-1151)

Hildegard of Bingen [monochrome reproduction by Werneke, A. (1986)]

Mixed media on paper

(Hozeski, 1995:58)

apparent in the illumination yet, since the meanings attributed to these armies remain the same regardless, the Hozeski (1995) translation will be the source of choice for the vision's meaning.

In this vision, Hildegard sees the concentric circles formed by the angels as illustrative of the relationship between the body, the soul, and the senses. The two outer armies surrounding five more armies, all arranged as if they were a crown, signify that

... since the body and soul of a person are united by the power of their strength, they ought to order the five senses – cleansed through the five wounds of God's Word – to follow the right way according to the inner commands of the person. (Hozeski, 1995:69)

The two armies of angels in the centre of the mandala signify that “the faithful who direct the five senses of their bodies to heavenly things” (Hozeski, 1995:72) are aware that, as a result of these actions, the same five wounds of Jesus have redeemed them. The body and soul are therefore related to each other not simply in the way that one circle within another is, but rather as are the concentric crowns of angelic armies. From the basis of this relationship, the body and soul are related to the five senses in the same way as the two outer armies of angels are related to the five inner armies, arranged like a crown. Eternal redemption and the relationship of faith between the body, soul, and God are represented by the two armies of angels arranged in a circle like a crown at the very centre of the image.

Of this central point, she reports that she does not see any distinct form in the two armies of angels. Hildegard's explanation for this provides a possible reason for the as yet unanswered question of why it is circles which are so routinely linked with spiritual healing. Her statement regarding the significance of this formlessness is that

... there are many mysteries among the blessed spirits which are not shown to the human race. Because as long as a person exists as a mortal, that person will not be able to understand those things which are eternal. (Hozeski, 1995:73)

However, rather than give up hope upon receipt of such a message, the rest of her visions will be explored for the representative qualities of the circles within them. After all, if it is not possible to understand them, what has Hildegard been explaining so far? Failure on her part to understand the representative qualities of two circles at the centre of a vision does not mean that insight into their many mysteries cannot be gained from comparison with other circles, but rather provides further incentive for the analysis of her remaining visions.

8.2 The Second Part of *Scivias*

8.2.1 First Vision; God as Eternal, Undivided and Powerful

There are seven circles visible in the illustration of the First Vision of the Second Part of *Scivias*, and an eighth shown as present by its crescent appearing from the lower edge of the image, as can be seen in Plate 8.2.1.1. Not all, however, are described in the text. The reason for choosing to include additional circular forms in the illustration can only be surmised although, given the meanings attributed to circles so far in *Scivias*, it seems likely that their inclusion is both intentional and significant.

One of the circles which is identifiable from the description of its properties, though a direct reference to its shape is lacking, is the very bright fire which appears to be both the top circle and the bottom crescent. There is movement within the vision's description, and the dual visual representation of this bright fire makes sense of this

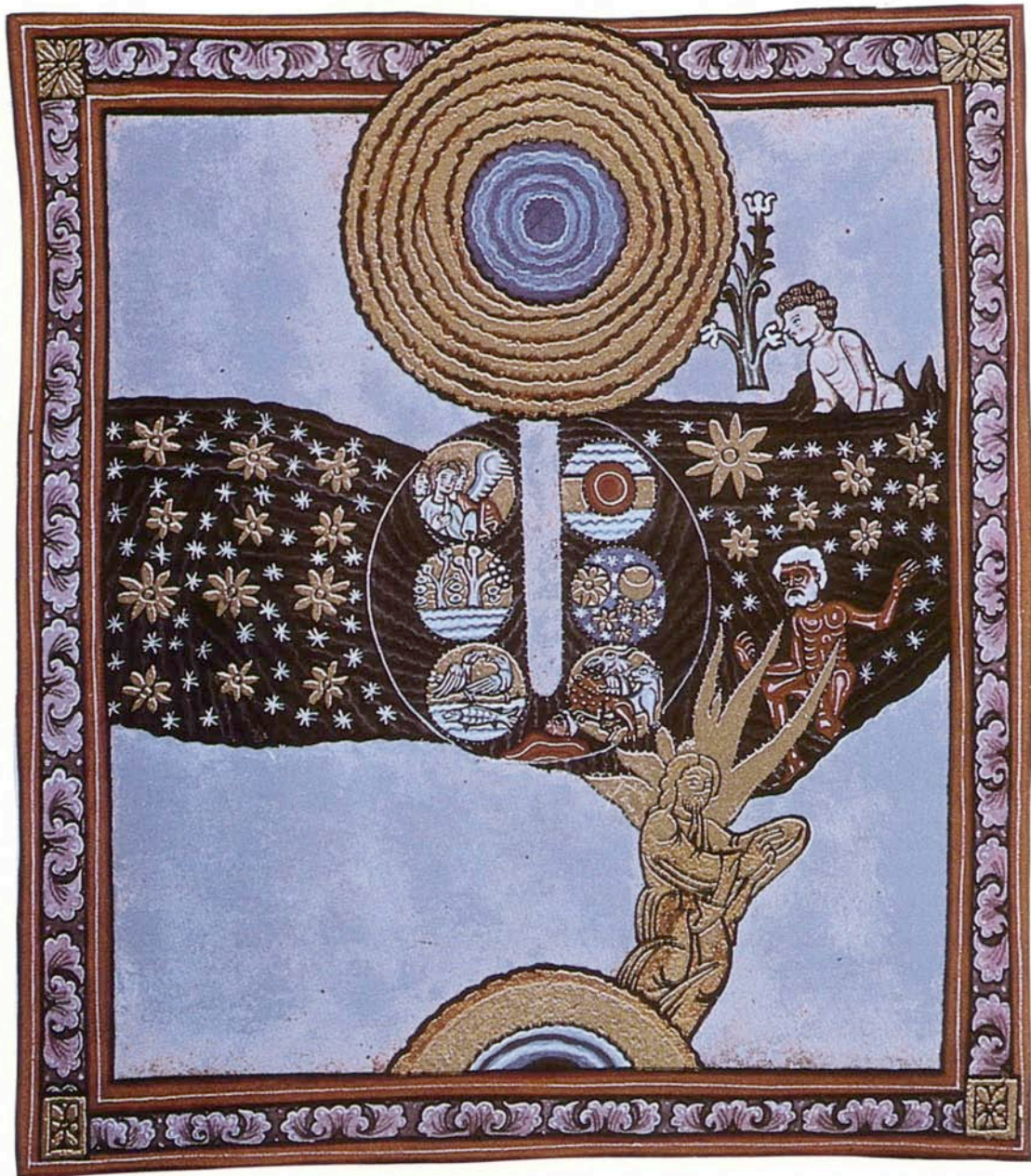


Plate 8.2.1.1: *The First Vision of the Second Part of Scivias*, (1141-1151)

Hildegard of Bingen

Mixed media on paper

(Fox, 1985:66)

movement, allowing the central circle to be the air which starts below the fire and later rises. This fire is described as being

... incomprehensible, inextinguishable, wholly living, and appearing as if it were totally alive. (Hozeski, 1995:77)

Its meaning in Hildegard's explanation is that of God, alive and omnipotent. The incomprehensibility of the fire shows that God "has never been blackened by any evil" (Hozeski, 1995:79). Though, again, no mention is made of the circular form, its qualities are referred to in the explanation that "God is divided by no divisions, either in the beginning or at the end," (Hozeski, 1995:79) since the circle is the shape which demonstrates this concept most clearly. It is then the qualities of the fire which are compared with God, such as being inextinguishable and totally alive.

In fact, the only circle within the illustration to be described as such in the vision's text is the central circle of the image, representing the air. According to Hildegard, its roundness signifies "the incomprehensible power of God. God's divinity does not lack anything in any way" (Hozeski, 1995:81).

The air, in its round form, suddenly rises up during the vision "by the very great power of God's will," (Hozeski, 1995:81) and the flame which represents God makes the air perfect by sending sparks into it. Following this, "The air sparkled and was put in order, just as heaven and earth" (Hozeski, 1995:81). The remainder of the passage refers to creation, and it is God's creation of the world which is depicted in the six circles within the circle of the air; one for each day of creation. Hildegard describes these creatures as sparkling in every direction because of the beauty of their perfection. This might suggest a textual reason for their circular boundaries, since, in other visions, Hildegard depicts points of light which radiate outwards in every direction as circular. The quality of sparkling in every direction could likewise provide one possible reason

for the choice of circular boundaries for God's creation in this image. The link between circles and perfection in her images suggests another possible reason for this choice, so the six circular forms neither surprise, nor appear out of place.

8.2.2 Second Vision; The Trinity as a Circle

The Second Vision of the Second Part takes the same silent significance of the circle one step further. Shown in Plate 8.2.2.1, the vision's illustration depicts a man surrounded by two circles, so that the circular form dominates the image, yet there is no direct reference to the shape in the vision's description. There are references to light, which supports the suggestion here that the form created by light radiating out from a point is observed by Hildegard as forming a sphere.

The paradox within the vision's description would present a challenge for any person attempting to illustrate its image, and the form of a circle conveys the text's essence well. Hildegard sees the Trinity of God, God's Word (the Son), and the Holy Spirit as a single form, yet with three components which take up the same space and are connected to one another. The central figure of the "person who was the color of a sapphire" (Hozeski, 1995:87) represents the Word of God, which, given the human form taken by Jesus, makes sound physical sense, although this author notes that the person is not attributed distinctly male qualities in the illustration. It is the two circles surrounding this person which illustrate the paradox within the vision's description. The sapphire coloured person is described as being

... completely surrounded by a very pleasant fire of reddish color. The very bright light completely surrounded this fire of reddish color, and at the same time this fire completely surrounded the light. Both the fire and the light surrounded the



Plate 8.2.2.1: *The Second Vision of the Second Part of Scivias*, (1141-1151)

Hildegard of Bingen

Mixed media on paper

(Fox, 1985:22)

person, existing as one light with one force of potentiality.

(Hozeski, 1995:87)

Given the task of depicting a bright light which completely surrounds a fire, which at the same time completely surrounds the said bright light, it would be challenging to find any means of representing them satisfactorily. The form of the circle is, however, the most obvious shape with which to show three (or four) dimensional light and fire sharing the same space.

This fact may be irrelevant, since the meanings of this light and fire may dictate their shape based on previous visions. The bright light signifies God, who is attributed the qualities of being “without any blemish of illusion, defect, and falsehood,” (Hozeski, 1995:87) and the fire signifies the Holy Spirit, likewise without any blemish of “dryness, death, and darkness” (Hozeski, 1995:87). God first appears as a round form in the Third Vision of the First Part of *Scivias*, so the continuation of the circular theme as the chosen shape of representation could explain the reason for depicting God as such, despite the description’s silence on the subject. The Holy Spirit is bound to assume the same shape in the illustration due to the mutual enclosure of its form and that of God in Hildegard’s description.

8.2.3 Third Vision; A Circular Force of Potentiality

In the Third Vision of the Second Part, depicted in Plate 8.2.3.1, there is again no mention of a circle in the description, although the form appears in the illustration. The Church as mother, and bride of Christ, is described with a wondrous crown on her head. Its meaning is edited out of Hozeski’s (1995) translation, which seems fully justified when compared with the Bishop and Hart version (1990). In this translation the crown is mentioned in the description, but its explanation makes no sense of the crown, nor indeed does it make any reference to its shape, qualities, properties or presence.



Plate 8.2.3.1: *The Third Vision of the Second Part of Scivias*, (1141-1151)

Hildegard of Bingen [monochrome reproduction by Werneke, A. (1986)]

Mixed media on paper

(Hozeski, 1995:96)

In the vision's illustration, God is shown with a circular halo, which receives no mention in the text, and is therefore likely to originate from contemporary depictions of God in human form. The third circle in the vision appears in the image's lower right hand quadrant. It is described in the vision's text as

... that peaceful light with the shape of a person inside it –
which was in one of my earlier visions ... (Hozeski, 1995:97).

Although visually it resembles the bright fire representing God in the First Vision of the Second Part, the shape of the person, which is described in the text but absent from the circular image, makes it clear that this circle is the Trinity illustrated in the previous illumination, reappearing in the same form.

The repetition of, and focus on its circular shape rather than the sapphire-blue person confirms that the circular form is both deliberate and significant for the Trinity's image. The absence from this representation of the person in sapphire blue, combined with its similarity to the bright fire of God in the First Vision of the Second Part, serves as a visual reiteration of the properties of the trinity as described in the Second Vision of the Second Part. Since God, God's Word and the Holy Spirit are all part of one "force of potentiality," (Hozeski, 1995:87) the depiction of any one of the three must logically include the other two. The similarity noted therefore supports the visual difference as denoting consistency in concept.

8.2.4 Fourth Vision; The Holy Spirit as a Round Tower of Strength

The Fourth Vision of the Second Part, shown in Plate 8.2.4.1, contains two references to circular objects. Both of these are three dimensional structures. The continuity between this and previous visions is made evident by the same figure of the woman representing the Church. Behind her is "a large round tower," (Hozeski, 1995:101) which is the first circle mentioned, and this has a cone shaped roof, which is



Plate 8.2.4.1: *The Fourth Vision of the Second Part of Scivias*, (1141-1151)

Hildegard of Bingen [monochrome reproduction by Werneke, A. (1986)]

Mixed media on paper

(Hozeski, 1995:100)

the second. Hozeski (1995) has edited out the explanation of the vision. Hence the Bishop and Hart (1990) translation provides the necessary elucidation. The round tower symbolises that

... the Holy Spirit is boundless and swift to encompass all creatures in grace, and no corruption can take away the fullness of its just integrity. (Bishop and Hart, 1990:190)

The circle therefore represents the qualities of eternity and wholeness here. The tower's conical roof is associated with the "great power of Divinity," which is further attributed an "omnipotent majesty," which is "incomprehensible," yet "shown more clearly to mortal creatures" (Bishop and Hart, 1990:190) in the vision. This round tower of the Holy Spirit is placed behind the Church in such a way that it provides strength and support for it, so that it "can never be thrown down by any error of wickedness," (Bishop and Hart, 1990:191) thus adding protection to the qualities the circle represents in this image.

8.2.5 Fifth Vision; The Circular Trinity, its Miracles and Wisdom

The Church is once again depicted as an enormous female in the Fifth Vision of the Second Part, which is illustrated in Plate 8.2.5.1. Her appearance remains much the same, and additional elements from previous visions also recur in the text. There is a reference to a large crowd of people, some of whom have golden girdles on their heads. In later visions there appear girdles which are illustrated as being far from circular yet, in these instances, the shape of the head would define them as such. In this context, the golden girdle refers to the "glitter of chastity" (Hozeski, 1995:103), which adorns those who have chosen a monastic lifestyle.

Above the heads of everybody in the crowd the Trinity appears as described in the Second Vision of the Second Part, which is not shown in this vision's illustration. In



Plate 8.2.5.1: *The Fifth Vision of the Second Part of Scivias*, (1141-1151)

Hildegard of Bingen

Mixed media on paper

(Fox, 1985:70)

this case, it is finally described as being a circular form, as Hildegard states that “the unutterable Trinity appeared as if it had been carved in a sphere,” (Hozeski, 1995:103) which is identified as the image of her earlier vision later on in Hildegard’s explanation of the vision’s meaning. Its placement above the heads of this crowd indicates that “people hold to the honor of the heavenly and glorious Trinity both firmly and strongly” (Hozeski, 1995:108).

In this vision, the Trinity is connected with the crowd, sending out golden rays, which are also not depicted in the vision’s illustration. Its connection with the symbols around these people symbolises that

... the Trinity never stops working the miracles of its wisdom in the faithful people who strive for the virtues and who flee from the temptations of the devil. (Hozeski, 1995:109)

The circle is thus associated with the Trinity, the miracles which it performs, and its wisdom all at once in this vision.

8.2.6 Sixth Vision; Circular Mirrors

The Sixth Vision of the Second Part is unusual, since there are several circular forms in the vision’s illustration but absolutely no direct reference to any of them in the descriptive text. Plate 8.2.6.1 shows five obvious circles, not including Mother Church’s crown illustrated twice, the round chalice, or the circular bread of sacrament. The halo around Christ’s head could have found its way into the image due to pictorial convention at the time, as for God’s halo in an earlier vision. Halos also surround the heads of Christ, Mary and God in the smaller images contained within the four other dominant circles of the illustration.

These four circles in the lower half of the image contain illustrations of the Nativity, the Passion, the Burial, and the Resurrection of Jesus, which are the four most



Plate 8.2.6.1: *The Sixth Vision of the Second Part of Scivias*, (1141-1151)

Hildegard of Bingen

Mixed media on paper

(Fox, 1985:90)

important events of his life from the perspective of Christianity. The decision to surround these with circles is not based on any clear direction in the text. They are described as appearing “as if they were in a mirror” (Hozeski, 1995:128). If they do indeed derive their circular form from this account, then this would suggest that the mirrors with which Hildegard was familiar were more commonly rounded than cornered. If this is not the case, then their circular form would have to originate from some other source not indicated in the text, though the shape’s common occurrence within the preceding visions would justify this more than adequately.

There is a further circle mentioned in the explanation of the vision, simply referring to the shape of the world and its path of revolution, with no second meaning implied. Lastly, a faint clue is provided for the shape of the bread on the altar, which is circular in the illustration. After the explanation of how transubstantiation changes the bread into the body of Christ, it is described as flooded with brightness, which is explained as meaning that

... by the power of God a most holy warmth steeps the shining white host, just as radiating light enters the object upon which it falls by spreading itself out. (Hozeski, 1995:136)

This, in combination with the fact that the Bishop and Hart (1990) translation rephrases the shining white host as “the sparkling circle of obligation” (Bishop and Hart, 1990:243) supports this author’s observation that Hildegard was aware that a point of light radiating out in all directions creates a sphere of light, and provides an explanation for the sacrament’s circular form in this image.

8.2.7 Seventh Vision; The Devil’s Strong Circular Ears

The Seventh Vision of the Second Part marks the circle’s first association within Hildegard’s visions with anything untoward. The circle’s form is not obvious in the

vision's image, illustrated in Plate 8.2.7.1, and the reader's attention is drawn only to the circle's presence and attributes in the explanatory text. The image shows the faithful triumphing over Satan, who is depicted as a hideous worm emitting such unpleasantness as a thick fog and foul stench. Satan's ears are described as being "round and hairy," (Hozeski, 1995:161) which is explained as signifying that

... the devil surrounds people with a circle of craftiness in order to throw the people down fast. And what the devil throws down, the devil claims. (Hozeski, 1995:166)

Though there is no clear reasoning for the ears to be the vehicle for this metaphor, it associates the circle with strength. To be surrounded by a circle of craftiness is a challenge from which to escape, as made evident from the speed with which this enables the devil to throw one down fast. The circle here is thus employed by the devil for its powerful property of enclosure, raising the question of whether it is the circle which is crafty, or whether it is the devil who utilises the form to his own ends or projects the quality of craftiness on to the circle. It appears that the circle is attributed the quality of strength, and in this case is a circle of craftiness. This rare evil association highlights that the same questions regarding which attributes are intrinsic to the circle and which properties are attributed to it by association apply throughout Hildegard's visions.

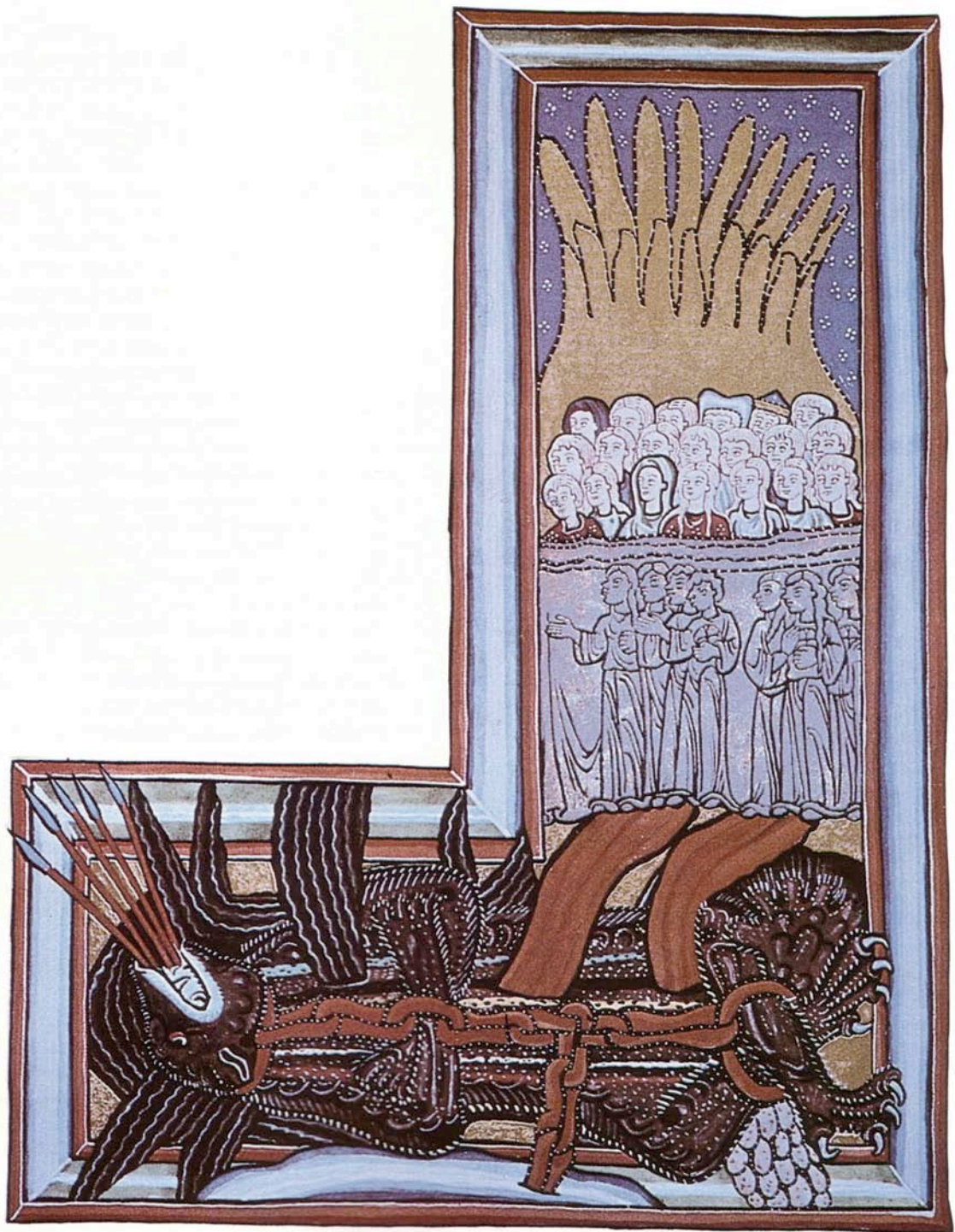


Plate 8.2.7.1: *The Seventh Vision of the Second Part of Scivias*, (1141-1151)

Hildegard of Bingen

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(Fox, 1985:94)

8.3

The Third Part of *Scivias*

8.3.1

First Vision; God's Encircled Throne

The circle's association with the devil or negativity is limited, and it swiftly returns to the heights of divine association enjoyed in the visions close to the beginning of *Scivias*. In the First Vision of the Third Part, which is shown in Plate 8.3.1.1, there is one circle evident, which does not correspond with the circle described in the text. The circle within the text is featured in the illustration, but its circular form is not shown completely. As the vision within which all subsequent visions in the Third Part are contained, it is metaphysically the largest, and noteworthy in historical significance. It can be compared accurately with the stage on which its following visions are set, since the thirteenth and final vision is written in a format which allows its presentation as the earliest known morality play.

The vision is dynamic in nature, which makes its physical representation problematic. One of the results of this is that the blue circle which fills the lower half of the image is impossible to identify within the text. Given the movement within the vision, it could even be one of the circles which is described in the text, though it could just as plausibly be an iron coloured mountain, the fear of God, or a star representing the devil. Since its identity is ambiguous, it will be of greater benefit to focus on the circles which are described and explained by Hildegard.

The figure who is sitting at the top of the image is God, sitting on a throne, and this throne is described as being encircled. This is explained as representing "strong, original faith among the early Christian people" (Hozeski, 1995:180). In addition to the circle around the throne, there is a second circle the colour of which is described as gold and similar to the dawn, stretching outwards from God in the vision. In her description

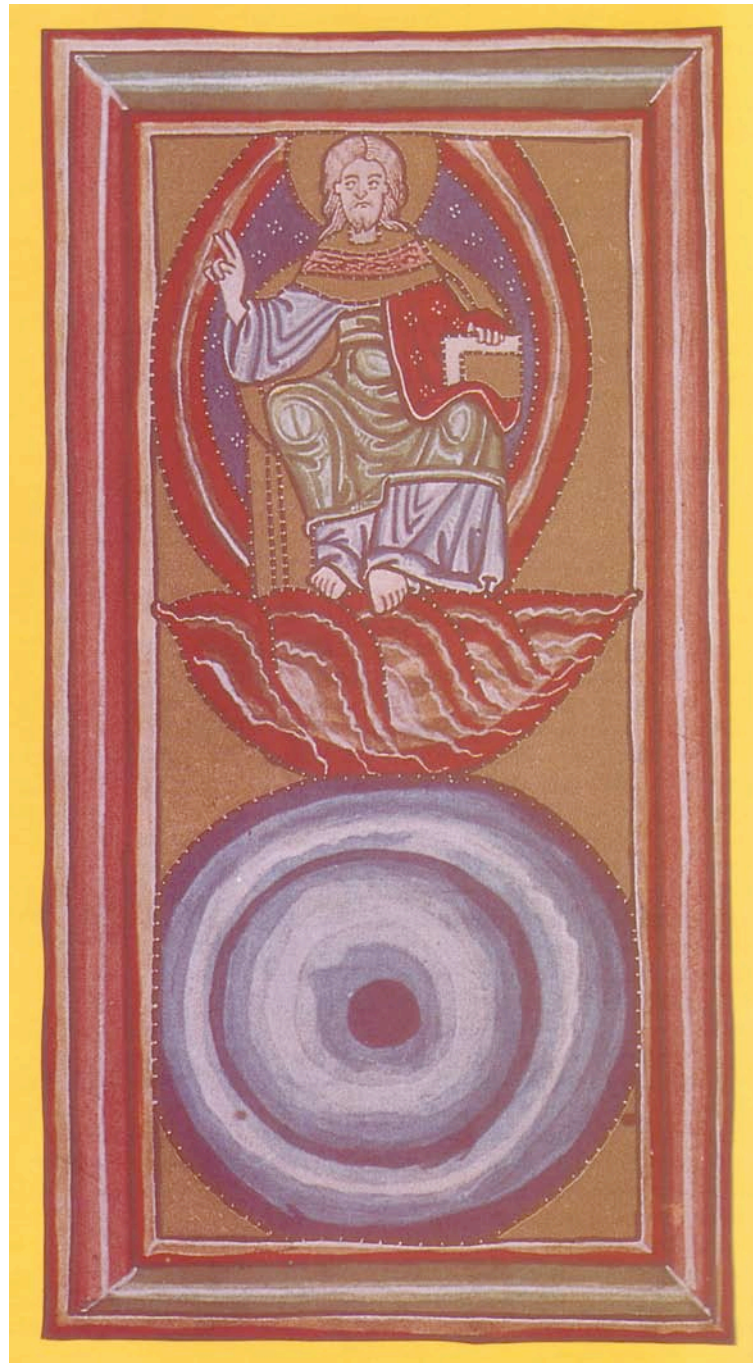


Plate 8.3.1.1: *The First Vision of the Third Part of Scivias*, (1141-1151)

Hildegard of Bingen

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(Fox, 1985:50)

of the vision, Hildegard admits that she was “not able to understand the circle in any way,” (Hozeski, 1995:181) which, in this case, has meaning for her. She explains that this circle indicates that

... the strongest power and work is stretched out from the all-powerful God. God understands all things with divine power.
(Hozeski, 1995: 181)

In close relation to this interpretation, this circle is then described as extending from the east, round through all the other cardinal points, and then returning to “the brightness in the east” (Hozeski, 1995:182). Almost rephrasing the previous explanation, Hildegard explains that

This circle did not have any end. This signifies that the power and work of God reaches and understands every creature.
(Hozeski, 1995:182)

In addition to the noteworthy property of having no end, in Hildegard’s vision, this circle was “so high above the earth that I could not comprehend it” (Hozeski, 1995:183). Hildegard has an explanation for this incomprehensibility too, stating that its height signifies that God’s power is so high that its comprehension belies the senses of any person. With ominous portent for the results of this study she further explains that

It is so incomprehensible in all things and above all things that no creature can define it in any way unless that creature has power beyond which it should have. (Hozeski, 1995:183)

This author trusts that this incomprehensibility refers to the power of God rather than the power of the circle which here represents that of God.

The circle then becomes more dynamic, shining its brightness so far that it reaches a stone within the vision, which represents the fear of God. In extending its

brightness to shine on this stone, Hildegard explains that the circle signifies the divine power sending forth “virtue from itself against concealed, unrepentant, unpunished and fearful evil” (Hozeski, 1995:183). Having reached this, the brightness of the circle changes the stone from the colour of iron to steel, signifying the strengthening properties of God’s justice. The brightness then makes the stone the colour of fire, reinforcing the same point and signifying that “God is the judicial fire, burning up the injustice of sin ...” (Hozeski, 1995:183). This shows the circle representing divine power which, in simple terms, has the ability to burn away badness.

8.3.2 Second Vision; The Mountain in the Circle

The Second Vision of the Third Part, illustrated in Plate 8.3.2.1, derives from a detail within the previous vision. As though the image has been created from zooming in on the last, the outer edge of the illustration is bound by a circle, which is the circle referred to in the First Vision of the Third Part. The same circle is therefore described again, albeit this time from the perspective of being inside it instead of being on the outside watching it. Hildegard thus describes the circle as containing a great mountain below God on the throne, the mountain supporting a building with four corners.

The mountain within the circle is explained by Hildegard as signifying faith, “since it stands on the powerful and strong work of God, who works powerfully” (Hozeski, 1995:190). In comparison with the mountain, which is described in terms of its placement within the circle, the building’s description is more interactive with the circle. The distance between the building and the circle’s brightness is thus used as a measure marking its extension into “the depth of the abyss at the vertex of the eastern corner,” (Hozeski, 1995:200) which makes so little visual sense that its explanation is greatly welcome. Hildegard explains this as meaning that “the fullness of the heavenly

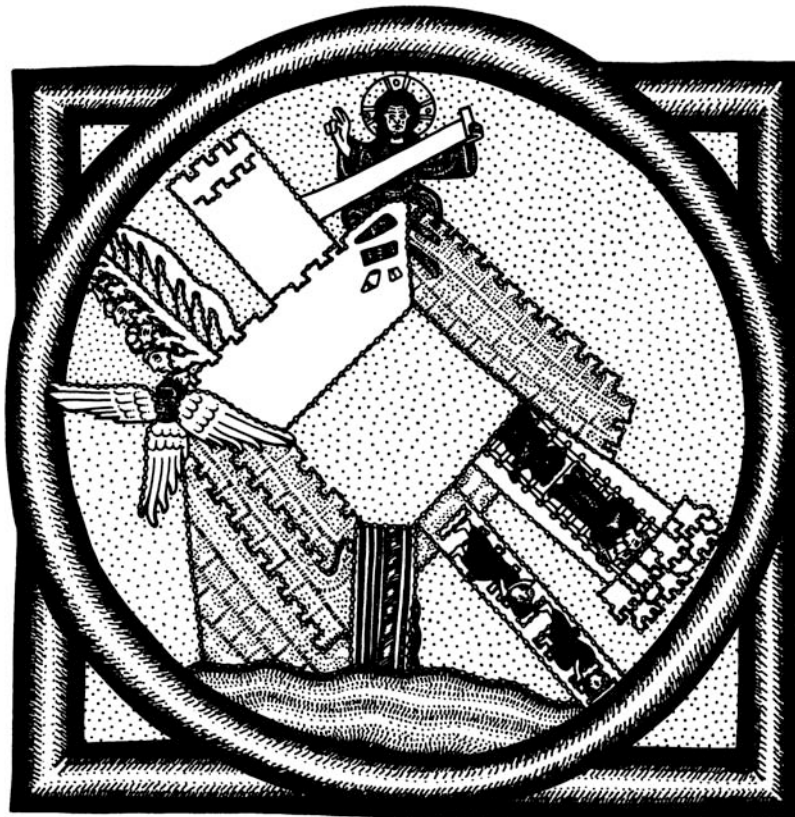


Plate 8.3.2.1: *The Second Vision of the Third Part of Scivias*, (1141-1151)

Hildegard of Bingen [monochrome reproduction by Werneke, A. (1986)]

Mixed media on paper

(Hozeski, 1995:188)

mysteries can be found among the works of God,” (Hozeski, 1995:200) with the added comment that these works are as visible as is a building.

In relation to the corners of the other cardinal directions, the width between the brightness of the circle and the building are described as being “so great that I was not able to comprehend its fullness in any way” (Hozeski, 1995:201). The lengthy explanation of this incomprehensibility details various spiritual concepts from which people are protected from knowing or understanding fully. These include the bad and the good without discrimination, such as the devil in the north and heavenly justice in its polar opposite. Within Hildegard’s explanation of the vision, God speaks in the first person, providing a summation of this protective quality:

All these things have been so hidden in my mysteries that neither the senses nor the mind of any human is strong enough to comprehend or understand in any way the profoundness of all these things, unless I grant that human permission to do so.
(Hozeski, 1995:201)

Whilst this describes incomprehensible mysteries contained within the circle, it nonetheless provides a faint glimmer of hope that the circle’s mysteries are not entirely hidden, but merely extremely well guarded.

8.3.3 Seventh Vision; The Trinity’s Rule of the Circle of the Earth

Visions Three, Four, Five and Six are all contained within the circle of the First Vision of the Third Part, but none make reference to any circle in the description, nor show any circle in their illustrations. The next reference to a circle is therefore in the Seventh Vision of the Third Part, which is shown in Plate 8.3.3.1. An image which would not look out of place in an exhibition of modern, abstract art, it depicts an enormous column representing the Trinity. In comparison to the earlier vision in which



Plate 8.3.3.1: *The Seventh Vision of the Third Part of Scivias*, (1141-1151)

Hildegard of Bingen

Mixed media on paper

(Fox, 1985:63)

the Trinity was described and depicted as a circular form, this vision shows it as a triangular column whose three corners are as sharp as swords. Despite the change in shape, the Trinity is still associated with the shape of the circle in this vision, not only via the small circles decorating the abstract border which receive no mention in the text, but also because it is explained that

The Trinity exists as if it were a perfect column of complete goodness, and it penetrates the highest and lowest places, as well as rules the whole circle of the earth. (Hozeski, 1995:264)

In the explanation of the vision, Hildegard first explains the meaning of the vision's appearance through a parable, and then analyses the parable for the reader. Within the analysis of this parable, Hildegard offers insight into the circle's spiritual healing associations, telling of the apostles travelling out "among the unbelieving people who did not have a center," (Hozeski, 1995:269) whose cities had been destroyed because of their lack of faith. Their lack of centre leaves the people weak and vulnerable and, as the apostles return their faith to them, the cities are rebuilt and consequently the people become strong again. In direct reference to the people who did not have a centre, Hildegard explains that "The center is a sign, of course, of the knowledge of holy innocence and justice" (Hozeski, 1995:269).

As the parable continues, some of the people without a centre did not want to receive the faith being offered to them by the apostles, refusing "the protection of the power of God," and, "As a result, they condemned themselves to death ..." (Hozeski, 1995:270). The combined message of these explanations is of the centre's relationship with wholeness, as though a person is a mandala. The centre which represents the knowledge of holy innocence and justice provides strength and divine protection, which keeps one alive. This would mean that being without a centre and therefore not being

like a mandala would result in death. Placed within the Christian context, it is faith in God which is the source of this protection, and the centre's association with the circle is actualised through Hildegard's explanation that, in order to offer protection to all,

... the Word of God was made manifest in many ways and wondrous signs for the whole circle of the earth. (Hozeski, 1995:270)

Following the parable's explanation of the importance of faith to one's centre, the description here of the earth as a whole circle makes one speculate whether the term refers to more than the earth's shape, and perhaps also refers to its people.

8.3.4 Eighth Vision; Crowned Virtues

The Eighth Vision of the Third Part shows another column, this time covered with the virtues personified, illustrated in Plate 8.3.4.1. As is the case for all visions within the Third Part which follow the First Vision of the Third Part, it is contained within the circle of that vision. Its references to circles are explanatory rather than visibly obvious in the illustration, and take the form of head or neckwear worn by the virtues.

The first virtue wears a crown on her head, made of gold and with three branches pointing upwards. The three branches of the crown signify the Trinity, which is placed on her head because she represents "the first revelation of the Word of God" (Hozeski, 1995:293). The shape of the crown signifies the unity of the Trinity, and the virtue's crowning signifies the importance of this virtue over all others. She also has a mirror on her chest within which is the image of Jesus. This mirror is not described as circular, nor does it appear to be in the image's reproduction, which suggests that the rationale for the shape of the mirrors in the Sixth Vision of the Second Part is less likely

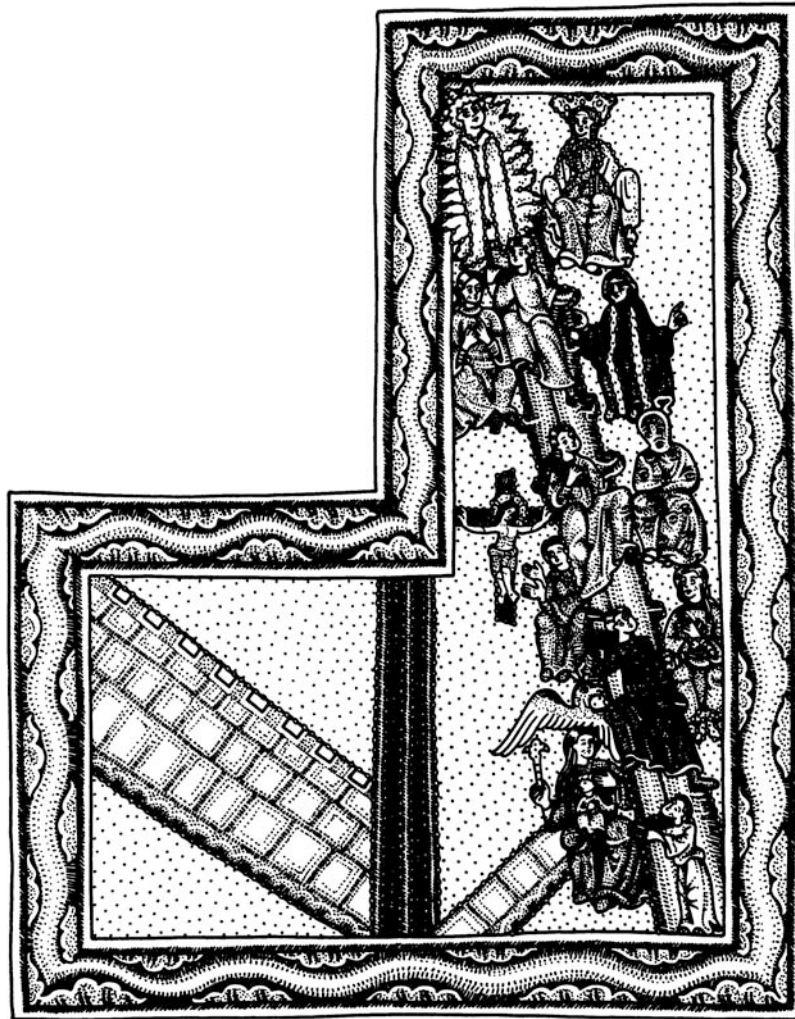


Plate 8.3.4.1: *The Eighth Vision of the Third Part of Scivias*, (1141-1151)

Hildegard of Bingen [monochrome reproduction by Werneke, A. (1986)]

Mixed media on paper

(Hozeski, 1995:276)

to relate to the shape of the mirrors known to Hildegard. This is further affirmed by the mirror on the womb of the seventh virtue, which is also not circular in the illustration.

The fourth virtue is obedience, and wears a “snowy-white band around her neck,” which stands for her ability to purify the minds of people through “the subjection of faithful obedience” (Hozeski, 1995:297). The fifth virtue represents faith, and wears a red band around her neck, signifying the blood of martyrdom with which she is embellished for “persevering faithfully in her own strength” (Hozeski, 1995:298). The combination of the circular references within this vision thus associate the shape with bestowing praise for good work upon the person who wears the shape.

8.3.5 Ninth Vision; God’s Orbit

The Ninth Vision of the Third Part, shown in Plate 8.3.5.1, shows no circle in the illustration, yet is not only contained within the same circle as the other visions in this Part of *Scivias*, but refers to it in its description. At the north end of the building described in the Second Vision of the Third Part is the world, and the people who are descended from Adam. These people are described as running between the

... bright wall of speculative knowledge of the building and the orbit of the circle which had been stretched out from the one sitting upon the throne. (Hozeski, 1995:305)

Whilst there is an explanation of this occurrence, not present in Hozeski’s (1995) translation but included in Bishop and Hart’s (1990), it makes no mention of the circle. Since this circle has already been explained as representing God in the vision in which it first appeared, there is no need for Hildegard to repeat its explanation. The people are therefore running to or from God, depending on their choice between the good and evil of which they have knowledge. From Bishop and Hart’s (1990)



Plate 8.3.5.1: *The Ninth Vision of the Third Part of Scivias*, (1141-1151)

Hildegard of Bingen [monochrome reproduction by Werneke, A. (1986)]

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(Hozeski, 1995:304)

translation, the fact that they are contained within the circle appears to represent that “... God has shown them His power ...” (Bishop and Hart, 1990:459) and that the people therefore know that whatever they do is known and judged by God, as the circle within which they are contained.

There is a second reference to a circular object in this vision, which is another crown on the head of the virtue of wisdom. Further reinforcing the circle’s association with spiritual blessing and worthiness, the crown

... shone with much brilliance. This signifies that the majesty of God, being without any beginning or end, shines with incomparable honor. (Hozeski, 1995:313)

In addition to the function as a symbol of spiritual merit, the circle here also symbolises the eternity of God, as it has been associated in earlier visions.

8.3.6 Tenth Vision; The Circle of Divine Mercy

The Tenth Vision of the Third Part breaks the trend of its immediate predecessors and shows a circle clearly in the illustration, shown in Plate 8.3.6.1. This is in addition to the circle within which it is contained. One of the virtues appearing in this vision is contained within a wheel. This wheel is explained as being

... the circle of divine mercy, which fights the arts of the Devil by the secret power of God, and builds a spiritual structure in human minds. (Bishop and Hart, 1990:484)

This has critical potential for the spiritual healing associations of the circle. Though the form of the spiritual structure built in human minds is not specified, the fact that it is the circle of divine mercy which places it there by the power of God constitutes a particularly cogent link between the independent occurrence of circles and its association of healing the world over.



Plate 8.3.6.1: *The Tenth Vision of the Third Part of Scivias*, (1141-1151)

Hildegard of Bingen

Mixed media on paper

(Fox, 1985:98)

This wheel representing divine mercy is described as being in a state of continual revolution, and surrounds the stationary figure of the virtue of “Contempt of the World” (Hozeski, 1995:334). Hildegard’s explanation for this is that God’s mercy

... is always flexible to those who seek it. It also means that the perfection of Christ has no movement and is not unstable in its contempt of the world. (Hozeski, 1995: 338)

The wheel also has words inscribed on it, quoting from John in the bible, which read: “Whoever serves me, follows me. And wherever I am, this one will be my servant there” (Hozeski, 1995:338). The significance of this inscription on the wheel is explained by Hildegard as indicating that, whoever follows the Christian life faithfully, “will rejoice in heavenly blessedness,” (Hozeski, 1995:338) and is promised an eternal afterlife in the company of the angels.

8.3.7 Twelfth Vision; Judgement in Circles

There is no reference to any circle in the Eleventh Vision of the Third Part, though the Twelfth Vision of the Third Part more than compensates for this in its pictorial representation of circles. There are two illustrations accompanying the vision’s description and explanation, shown in Plates 8.3.7.1 and 8.3.7.2. In the first illumination, Jesus is shown inside the circle, which is the circle of the First Vision of the Third Part, and there is another depicted beneath him. In the second image, God is evident in the circle at the top, with another circle in the centre of this at God’s lap. Below this are two further circles containing people and natural objects, respectively.

The vision’s description, however, does not elaborate on the meaning of any of these circles. The first reference to the shape is made in a statement describing the volume of the voice Hildegard hears, which was “so loud that it could be heard throughout the whole circle of the lands” (Hozeski, 1996:365). Due to its positioning



Plate 8.3.7.1: *The Twelfth Vision of the Third Part of Scivias*, [first image] (1141-1151)

Hildegard of Bingen

Mixed media on paper

(Fox, 1985:106)



Plate 8.3.7.2: *The Twelfth Vision of the Third Part of Scivias*, [second image] (1141-1151)

Hildegard of Bingen

Mixed media on paper

(Fox, 1985:110)

below Jesus, the lower circle in the first image is then made evident as “that great storm which was cleansing the world” (Hozeski, 1995:365). The second reference comes at the end of the vision’s description, and describes the sun, moon and stars all ceasing to move “around in a circle, so that day and night were no longer distinguished” (Hozeski, 1995:366).

The essential meaning of the vision is that of judgment on the occasion of “the end of the world” (Hozeski, 1995:366). By comparing the illustrations with the text, it is apparent that the circles only contain those things which are good. The most threatening content of any of the circles is the cleansing storm, through which “The good ones were, of course, separated from the evil ones” (Hozeski, 1995:365). The people who are judged to be evil are not allowed into the circle, but sent to the devil, as Hildegard explains that

They did not get involved in this judgment, but just as if they were seeing the movement in the circle, they waited for this judgment to end. They sighed with bitter sighs as they waited.
(Hozeski, 1995:366)

The second image shows the world and heaven after the cleansing and judging process. There are no evil people shown in this illustration, nor the devil, but only goodness and a literal stack of circles. Whilst the circles are not justified within the text, the change from temporal time into “the eternity of God who has no end,” (Hozeski, 1995:366) does refer indirectly to the quality of endlessness best represented by the shape of the circle.

8.3.8 Thirteenth Vision; Circles Praising Celestial Order

The Thirteenth Vision of the Third Part is the final vision of *Scivias*, which reads as a morality play featuring the virtues who sing their parts, making it more like a

medieval morality opera. The illustration accompanying the vision's text is shown in Plate 8.3.8.1, and contains seven circles. These circles are not described in the text, but, just as none of the circles in the previous vision contained anything that was not good, so all of these circles contain nothing but goodness. As this vision follows the last, so it follows the end of time, and God's judgment of all. The entire text which follows the vision's brief description consists of

... the voice of a multitude singing a musical performance with
harmony in praise of the celestial orders. (Hozeski, 1995:375)

Within the lines of these songs there are references to circles. The first of these is featured in the third song, about "the Patriarchs and Prophets" (Hozeski, 1995:377). These are praised as being

You who turn around as wheels, speaking wondrously the
mystical things of the mountain, which touches heaven ...
(Hozeski, 1995:377)

The format of this vision's presentation is completely different to those preceding it, and its explanation does not extend to an explanation of the lyrics of the songs heard by Hildegard. There is therefore no justification for the patriarchs and prophets to be likened to wheels turning, save for the qualities associated with the circles in the earlier twenty-five visions. Similarly, the apostles are called "the sound of the circle of the land" (Hozeski, 1995:378) with no explanation, though this example is more descriptive than metaphoric, and therefore requires little justification.

Lastly, the voice of God refers to a crown in what is, in effect, the closing speech of the vision. In reference to the people who reject the "mystical words of this book," God says "I will cast the crown from his or her head ..." (Hozeski, 1995:395), essentially threatening to curse them for not believing Hildegard. This is the final

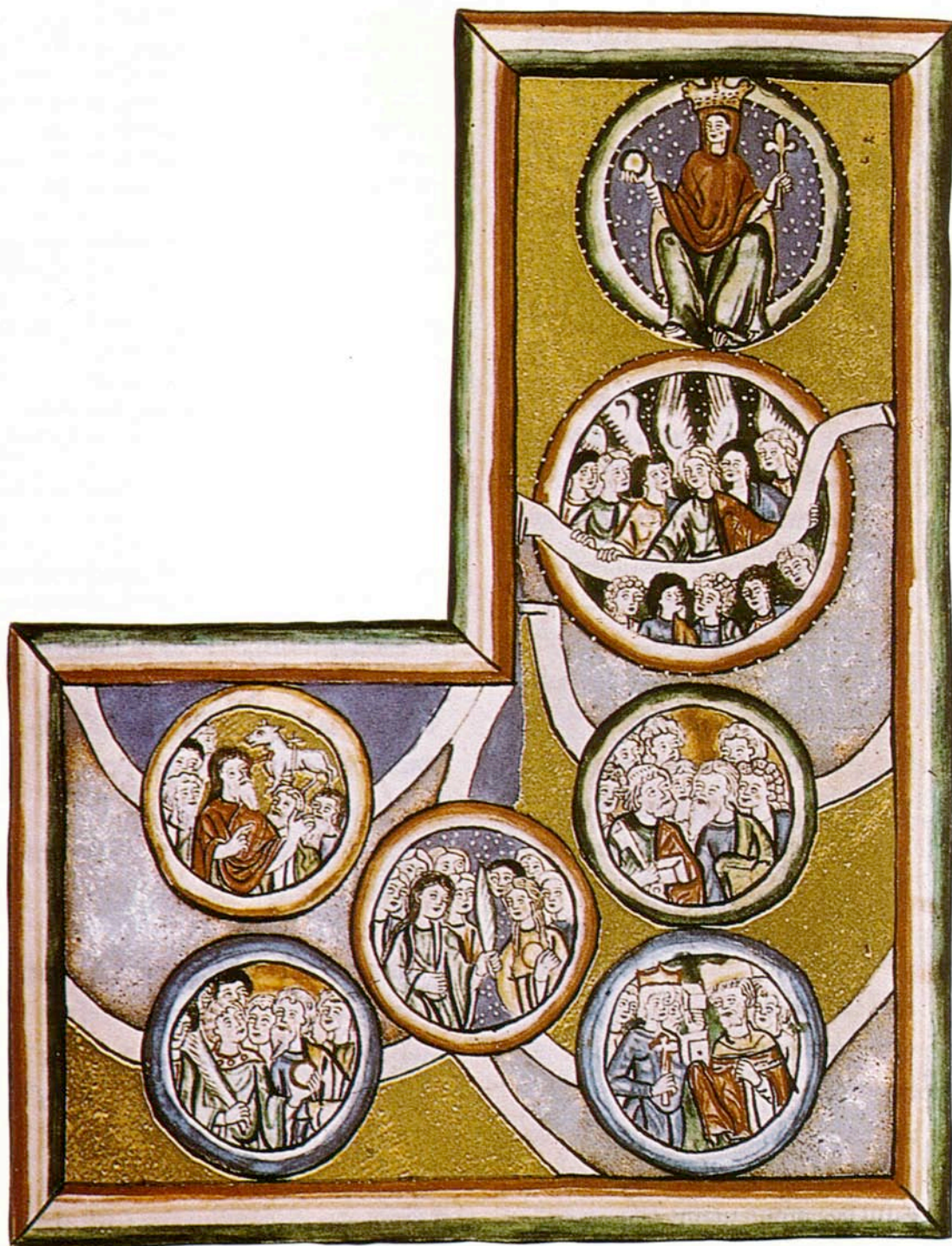


Plate 8.3.8.1: *The Thirteenth Vision of the Third Part of Scivias*, (1141-1151)

Hildegard of Bingen

Mixed media on paper

(Fox, 1985:114)

example of the circle as a crown representing God's favour, which will be knocked from its place should the wearer displease God by rejecting the message of Hildegard's visions. In all fairness, those who have accepted the words of the book are blessed for doing so and, whilst these are not described as being crowned for doing so, the act of removing the crown from the disbelievers leads to the conclusion that they are already wearing them. There is no point in looking to the illustration for corroboration of this observation, since the people in question are the readers, and therefore not depicted in the illustration of the celestial celebration of the end of time.

The overall impression gained from the visions of *Scivias* is that they are the shape of choice for the representation of all things good and powerful. From God's infinity to blessing and protection, the circles of *Scivias* tend, with only one exception of Satan's round ears, to depict or surround spiritual beings or concepts of merit and importance to Christianity, then as now. The next step is to undertake a similar examination of the circles in Hildegard's second and third visionary works, documenting the associations of the circle within their texts and imagery.

Chapter Nine The Visions of *Liber Vitae Meritorum* and *De Operatione Dei*

9.1 The Circle's Attributions in *Liber Vitae Meritorum*

Liber Vitae Meritorum is presented by Hildegard as one vision, and is hence dealt with as an entirety here. It is described by Hozeski, (1995) as being “less valuable” (Hozeski, 1995:xxviii) than her other two mystical works. If this means that its style of presentation precludes its representation in the form of medieval images, then this appears to be true. However, he follows this condemnatory statement with the summation of the book as “the vision of a very large circle in which the Virtues and Vices are grouped,” (Hozeski, 1995:xxviii) which makes it of clear value to this study.

It is Hildegard's words which are the important ones, and with no illustrations to provide the reader with a second source of reference to occurrences of circles, these words are all the more important, as it is simply a matter of searching through the text for their occasional reference. The text does indeed describe the vices and virtues personified, and their placement in the vision, their conversations and interaction, result in a handbook for living a good, Christian life. There are instructions on how to repent for a wide variety of sins, from envy to bestiality, and different brands of murder from accidental and self defence to multiple.

The first mention of a circle within Hildegard's text describes the earth as supporting the creatures which live on it. It is likened to “the knees and calves of its creatures. Like the axis of a wheel, it carries some creatures” (Hozeski, 1994:23). This needs no explanation in Hildegard's text, as it is a relatively simple simile. The knees and calves of creatures are seen to support them from falling, and so the earth supports

its creatures. Its similarity to a wheel describes the manner in which the earth carries its creatures, as well as refers to its circular shape, of which Hildegard was aware.

The circle is next mentioned as a feature of the personification of pride. A bizarre creature with bat wings, a man's chest, the feet and legs of a locust, no stomach or back, and a woman's face. The circle is placed in the form of

... a very fine film, like a golden circle, stretched from the point of its chin to the top of each side of its jaw. (Hozeski, 1994:126)

In Hildegard's explanation of this vice's appearance, the purpose of this circle is not made clear, or at least, the relevance of its shape is not made obvious. After the same circle's later description, Hildegard states that it is

... because it neither gives honor nor shows care but only shows contempt to anyone who knows God who knows all things. (Hozeski, 1994:142)

She goes on to explain that it tries to overcome God with a gnashing of teeth and biting, but God that is stronger, which suggests that the golden circle of fine film around its mouth functions as a gag placed there by God.

In between this circle's first description and its explanation there is another reference to a wheel, requiring similarly little explanation as the first wheel mentioned in *Liber Vitae Meritorum*. This reference occurs within the part of the vision which explains that God shows people how not to fall "into the confusion of the blindness of sin" (Hozeski, 1994:135) because people have the knowledge of good and evil between which to choose. Therefore people are "able to know what part of the wheel of knowledge declines," (Hozeski, 1994:135) and make their decisions accordingly.

The next occurrence of the circle in this enormous vision bears greater relation to the circle's spiritual healing associations. It relates to the strength which all things receive from God because

... they are part of a circle, of course, the circle in which the world stands, according to the plan and disposition of God.
(Hozeski, 1994:153)

The sun, moon and stars are described as supporting "the wheel of the circle with their burning strength," (Hozeski, 1994:153) and as drinking the water which they attract to themselves. This is to prevent the circle from catching fire from their burning, but the circle is described as shining through the water nonetheless. At the conclusion of this description, which features as the explanation of the form of zeal, Hildegard explains that "All these things have been truly ordered by the highest Creator" (Hozeski, 1994:153), who arranges all things as best as they can be. Redolent of the centre of faith which keeps one alive, which is discussed in the Seventh Vision of the Third Part of *Scivias*, Hildegard cautions the reader with the warning

... let he [*sic*] who desires life grasp these words and store them in the innermost chamber of his heart. (Hozeski, 1994:153)

Hildegard's next mention of a circle is in the form of another wheel, this time representing the vice of changeableness. This wheel is "like the wheel of a wagon, turning in the darkness," (Hozeski, 1994:179) and has four spokes, and a man standing within the wheel who holds a spoke in each hand and turns with the wheel. It is described as turning sluggishly like a millstone, because it has been "weighed down with so many excesses and loaded down with so many vanities" (Hozeski, 1994:192) and is thus slowed by its unfaithfulness. The very fact that the wheel is turning signifies that changeableness has no stability. The explanation of why changeableness is such a

great sin is that the unfaithful choose changeableness on the suggestion of the devil “because the devil is not righteous and does not love moderation” (Hozeski, 1994:192). Moderation is therefore the opposite of changeableness, in terms of vice and virtue.

The words of the virtue of contempt of the world then bring a positive association of the circle to the vision. Appearing as a voice from a storm cloud, this virtue denounces the temptations of the flesh, and states that as a result it sits with the Holy Spirit and makes “a circle with the chariot of the precepts of God” (Hozeski, 1994:183). If tempted with worldly desires, its response is to “awaken my fear of God and the circle of the fire of the Holy Spirit” (Hozeski, 1994:183). According to this virtue, when it is kindled by burning flame of this circle, the fire burns all its worldly things and the virtue travels “to heavenly things in a celestial chariot” (Hozeski, 1994:183). This chariot is not specified as the same chariot created in denouncement of earthly things, yet the implication is that it is the same one, due to its association with the Holy Spirit. The chariot therefore creates a circle, and the Holy Spirit is also a burning circle, which brings the virtue to the chariot. This could be Hildegard’s first circular argument, as the cause and result seem to lead to one another.

Immediately following this passage, the vice of discord speaks, and as it explains how it does one thing for only as long as it pleases it because it becomes bored so easily, it says it turns “everything upside down – the noble to the ignoble, the rich to the poor – like a wheel” (Hozeski, 1994:183). The circle here is employed to demonstrate its revolutionary property, rather than illustrating any particular spiritual concept.

The zeal of God speaks soon afterwards, however, and is described as appearing in human form. There is also a circle included in the description of its appearance, in the form of “a fiery circle that gave out fiery tongues” on its head. It speaks of “the circle of

the fire of the Holy Spirit,” (Hozeski, 1994:184) which has the power to cast down and wipe out those who flout God’s justice. The fiery circle on its head is later explained as meaning that

... the zeal of God, blazing from the beginning of the world ...
burns up every crime kindled by the heat of desire and
committed by a rational creature; it does not miss anything or
leave anything unexamined either. (Hozeski, 1994:198)

This circle is therefore associated with qualities such as being all encompassing, all knowing, and good. There is also no escape from it.

The next mention of a circle follows this explanation of the zeal of God, and features in a positive role again. A faithful man speaks of the inescapability of sinning in his life, simply because of the belief in original sin which means he was a sinner from the moment he was born. He describes himself as rolling around in his sins “with instability, like a wheel,” (Hozeski, 1994:199) no matter how hard he tries to escape them. The conclusion to his speech is that he knows that, by repenting, he will be cleansed and live. The wheel is therefore employed for its property of movement in this instance and, although it is once again associated with instability, it is not the wheel which is at fault, but the person whose actions are described in terms of the wheel’s movement.

The last circle described in *Liber Vitae Meritorum* is potentially the most significant. In the section of the vision which describes the future end of the world, heaven and earth are described as having been cleansed, along with all the other elements. In addition,

Man, who is blessed, having also been cleansed along with the
other elements, will be like the wheel of the golden circle and

will be on fire in spirit and flesh. Every hidden secret will be opened to him. Men who are blessed will cling to God and he will give them the fullness of joy. (Hozeski, 1994:266)

This reference to a wheel of the golden circle is, sadly, not accompanied by its explanation by Hildegard. All that can be deduced with certainty is that this circle is associated with being blessed, and experiencing the fullness of joy, which can only be described as beneficial. Based on the associations of previous circles in this vision, the fire of the spirit and flesh suggests the burning away of sin, as in the fiery circle on the head of the zeal of God. The fact that the state of being like this wheel of the golden circle is associated in this citation with being cleansed is supportive of this supposition. The relationship between the circle and the secrets which will no longer be hidden is not clear. It could be that this circle represents the knowledge of these secrets, or the disclosure of these secrets might be the source of the fullness of joy.

What is clear is that, although Hozeski, (1995) claims that the entire vision of *Liber Vitae Meritorum* takes the form of an enormous circle, Hildegard never spells it out as such. The vision certainly describes God as being a towering central figure of a man, looking to the four cardinal areas of the world, but it seems to be Hozeski's (1995) assumption that this view is a circle, based on the shape of the globe. It may be true, although Hildegard does not say so in the translation of her own words, and the occurrence of four corners does not, in the history of her visions so far, result in a circular image. What can be said with certainty, instead, is that this vision takes the form of a giant mandala with God at the centre, which allows greater possibilities for its ultimate shape.

9.2

The Circle's Attributions in *De Operatione Dei*

The circle's role in *De operatione Dei* is of greater significance than in the previous visionary work. As a series of visions which follow a progressive order, they have more in common with the visions of *Scivias* than the single, expansive vision of *Liber Vitae Meritorum*. The circle also returns to its dominating visual position within the illustrations, as well as in the accompanying descriptive and explanatory text. Hildegard has, however, provided greater descriptive detail in the titles given to her visions in *De operatione Dei*, and these are therefore employed as the descriptive title here.

9.2.1

First Vision: On the Origin of Life

In the first vision of *De operatione Dei*, the reader is gently reintroduced to the circle in a significant role. The shape does not dominate the accompanying image, shown in Plate 9.2.1.1, but features as a golden ring on the first head of the figure pictured. This ring serves as a separator between the two figure's two heads, so that one is placed above the neck where it would normally be, and above the crown on its head there is a second head. In the vision's explanation, Hildegard describes this ring a second time, adding that

Another golden ring surrounds the head of this appearance, for the Catholic faith, which has spread throughout the entire globe, began out of the most brilliant glow of the first dawn. (Fox, 1987:12)

This golden band is then attributed a second meaning in the vision's explanation. In combination, the two heads and the golden ring represent the Trinity, and the qualities of the circle are referred to in relation to God's qualities of being eternal and "without beginning and end" (Fox, 1987:12).



Plate 9.2.1.1: *First Vision: On the Origin of Life*, (1163-1173)

Hildegard of Bingen [monochrome reproduction by Werneke, A. (1987)]

Mixed media on paper

(Fox, 1987:9)

9.2.2

Second Vision: On the Construction of the World

The next vision describes a change in the appearance of the first, and this change takes the form of a wheel appearing in the chest of the figure who represents God. As can be seen in Plate 9.2.2.1, the heads separated by the golden crown remain visible in the illustration, and the wheel extends down to the feet of the figure. This vision essentially describes the universe and its relationship with God. Hildegard states very clearly that this vision elaborates upon the Third Vision of the First Part of *Scivias*, in which the universe appeared as a round egg. This time, the reference to its shape as an egg recede within a matter of several lines of text, and the wheel takes over as the defining shape. Fox (1985) notes that this brings the shape of Hildegard's vision into agreement with the scientific community's opinion of the shape of the universe at the time.

The six circles of luminous fire, black fire, pure ether, watery air, sheer white clear air, and a thin stratum of air are described by Hildegard as being present in this vision, and consistent with the circles in the earlier vision to which she refers. In modern terminology the concepts which Hildegard covers in this vision are those of the microcosm and macrocosm. In this vision, God and the universe are so intertwined as to be indistinguishable, and the way they function also describes the physical and spiritual make up of human beings. The man at the centre of the wheel is explained as representing Jesus coming to earth in physical form, and the same figure is also explained as representing the relationship between human beings and the earth, nature, the universe and God.



Plate 9.2.2.1: *Second Vision: On the Construction of the World*, (1163-1173)

Hildegard of Bingen

Mixed media on paper

(Fox, 1985:38)

To include every reference to the circle from within this vision would necessitate the repetition of at least half of its lengthy prose; hence only the fundamental meanings of the circles and the most significant spiritual comments will be adduced from the vision.

The six circles which form the basis of the universe's construction are explained as representing certain divine qualities. The circle of luminous fire "contains all the other elements and illuminates them." It symbolises "God's power, which dominates everything and gives light to all living things" (Fox, 1987:27). Under this circle of luminous fire is the circle of black fire, signifying its submission to the power of the first. This black fire represents judgment, and signifies that "everyone who opposes God will fall down into black darkness and all kinds of disaster" (Fox, 1987:27). Both these circles are described as uniting to form one single circle, which represents the combination of God's might and judgment in the form of divine justice.

The circle of pure ether is positioned beneath the circle of black fire, and it "encompasses the whole world in its curvature" (Fox, 1987:28). Representing the pure atonement of sinners, the circle is paradoxically described as possessing the same dimensions as the previous two circles because "it shines again from both these fires" (Fox, 1987:28). Through this equality, it also represents the manner in which God casts judgment, as Hildegard explains that "day and night signify nothing by themselves but only whatever God's will decrees" (Fox, 1987:28).

Beneath this circle of pure ether is the circle of watery air, again of the same dimensions as the circle of luminous fire. This watery air "indicates the holy works of exemplary and just individuals," whose works are pure and cause purification because "water washes away filth" (Fox, 1987:29). This quality of purification allows their works to achieve in their perfection "whatever God's grace enkindles" (Fox, 1987:29).

This speaks more of a quality required for pleasing God than representing one of God's qualities, yet the circle is still within the description of God and the universe.

The circle of sheer white clear air is described as being under the circle of pure ether, and this is attributed the same strength as human sinew. As a balancing tool preventing the watery circle from flooding the earth, this indicates that "discretion strengthens holy works by every kind of moderation" (Fox, 1987:29). Hildegard takes this opportunity to caution the reader not to punish him or herself to the extent that this takes their life, which would defeat the object of repentance and send one to damnation.

The circle of sheer white clear air has the same dimensions as the circle of black fire, which is explained as signifying that this circle is there to help humanity know the appropriate moderation in punishing its sinners. The watery circle of air sends moisture into the clear white air, representing dryness and wetness in balance, meaning that "our Protector and Guide holds equitable the scale of judgment," (Fox, 1987:30) which ensures that sins are judged and punished according to their severity. The relationship between the watery circle and the sheer white circle of clear air presents another visual paradox, as they are described as being "so closely tied to each other that they seem ... but a single layer," (Fox, 1987:30) which means that so far all the circles are the same size, take up the same space, but are paradoxically described as under or beneath each other progressively.

Finally, the sixth circle is the thin stratum of air, which is beneath the circle of clear white air, and extends

... along the entire circumference of the wheel because ...
everything in creation obtains vital power and stability from this
air. (Fox, 1987:31)

The meaning of this proffered by Hildegard is that the longing of believers for justice “emerges under the protective layer,” which is the discretion of the Holy Spirit’s influence and “the higher powers of virtue” (Fox, 1987:31). This translates as the stratum of air representing believers and the wheel representing virtue and the Holy Spirit, existing in close relationship, and illustrating the element of microcosm as macrocosm within Hildegard’s vision.

The six circles discussed so far in the vision are then described as bound together in such a way that there are no spaces between them. This gives them a combined strength, which Hildegard states as originating from the divine order, and gives the firmament stability. The meaning of this is that “the perfect powers of virtue in a believer” (Fox, 1987:31) are tied together and strengthened by the Holy Spirit so that good can triumph over evil.

Following this, the interaction of the top circle of fire and the watery circle is explained, as the fire penetrates all the other circles, as the water also does (with the possible exception of the circle of fire). The fiery circle is attributed the power to strengthen and purify, which combines with the watery circle’s distribution of life’s freshness. These symbolise God’s power to sanctify the faithful, and the reverence and praise of these believers respectively.

There is then introduced to the vision another circle, which is the sphere of the Earth, placed in the image’s centre. According to Hildegard,

It is maintained on all sides by these circles, is tied to them, and receives constantly from them the greening freshness of life and the fertility needed for the Earth’s support. (Fox, 1987:33)

The essence of Hildegard’s explanation of this aspect of her vision is that the model of the Earth deriving all its needs from the circles within which it is contained, also

functions as a model for the manner in which people derive everything they need from the Earth and therefore from God. She further explains that the earth is so much smaller than the other circles of the vision because it has been restrained by God, and this represents the faithful being constrained by the virtue of moderation, which keeps them free from guilt.

Whilst there are countless further references to circles within the vision which refer simply to the shape of the circles rather than their associated properties, there are two further references which stand out as of significance to the area of research. In the first of these, God is described as being like a wheel; a point which is reinforced by the word “whole” (Fox, 1987:26) which is applied to it, and which alerts this author to a healing association of the shape. The voice which Hildegard hears from the sky tells her that the Godhead is like a wheel because it

‘... has neither beginning nor end. No one can grasp it, for it is timeless. And just as a wheel encloses within itself what lies hidden within it, so also does the Holy Godhead enclose everything within itself without limitation, and it exceeds everything. For no one could disperse its might or overpower it or complete it.’ (Fox, 1987:26)

God as a wheel is thus whole, indestructible, encompasses all, and has no beginning or end. This heavenly voice, though speaking to Hildegard nearly thirty years later, provides additional support for the circular shape of the Second Vision of the Second Part of *Scivias*, which depicts the Trinity but mentions no circle in its first description. Hildegard also sees the soul as a sphere in the Fourth Vision of the First Part of *Scivias*. The combination of these statements of belief and their images make

this vision's subsequent comment regarding the nature of the soul in relation to the body all the more pertinent.

The vision's explanation thus turns eventually to the figure of the human being at its centre. The voice from heaven is once again quoted directly by Hildegard, who asserts that "Although small in stature, humanity is powerful in the power of its soul" (Fox, 1987:35). The figure is reaching out to the circle of the thin stratum of air, which signifies that the deeds of humanity have the power to effect the universe. The voice goes on to explain that, in the same way that a person's body is larger in size than his or her heart, so too

'are the powers of the soul more powerful than those of the body. Just as the heart of a human being rests hidden within the body, so also is the body surrounded by the powers of the soul since these powers extend over the entire globe.' (Fox, 1987:36)

The extension of the powers described here as reaching over the entire globe bring a direct circular reference to the soul. Based on the content of the vision's image, the shape of the soul in Hildegard's earlier vision, and the similarity to the wording of the earlier description of the Trinity, the present author considers it likely that Hildegard here intends to imply a circularity to the shape of the soul again. This time, however, the soul is attributed powers exceeding those of the body.

In Hildegard's vision of this "cosmic wheel," (Fox, 1987:44) the circle enjoys as high a status as can be achieved by a shape. God is described as a wheel, the universe as a series of interconnected circles reflecting God's powers, and the soul's powers as extending around the globe. In none of Hildegard's visions do any other shapes represent so many profound concepts at one time. In fact, the significance of this cosmic wheel is accentuated in the subsequent two visions, which continue the same theme,

explaining the progression of the vision with increasingly narrowing focus giving the visual and descriptive impression of zooming in on the centre.

9.2.3 Third Vision: On Human Nature

The Third Vision thus focuses its attention on the human being in the centre of the cosmic wheel. Whilst it is within the wheel of the last vision, God's depiction outside of the wheel has been omitted from the illustration, shown in Plate 9.2.3.1, as though just out of the field of Hildegard's physical vision. The theme of the vision is the relationship between the universe and health, both physical and mental. The animal heads shown in both this vision and the last blow winds, according to God's will, and these winds keep things moving, from the planets to people.

It is the interaction between these winds and what Hildegard calls the humors, which has the ability to weaken or strengthen an individual, depending on the qualities of the wind and the humor in question. Though the entire vision takes place within the circular image, there is just one specific reference to the shape within this vision's description and explanation. It also happens to discuss the matter of its relationship with the strength of human beings.

Hildegard describes an upper fire, in which there appeared "a circle that encircled the whole firmament from east to west" (Fox, 1987:56). From the circle's west side comes a wind which blows toward the seven planets, moderating their course. The significance of the wind which comes from this circle is that

... all of salvation ... finds rest in the divine might. It is this might that strengthens in every limb the inner sense of those who bind themselves to God. And so there emerges from this might a breath ... and the mysterious gifts of the Holy Spirit touch us human beings ... (Fox, 1987:63).

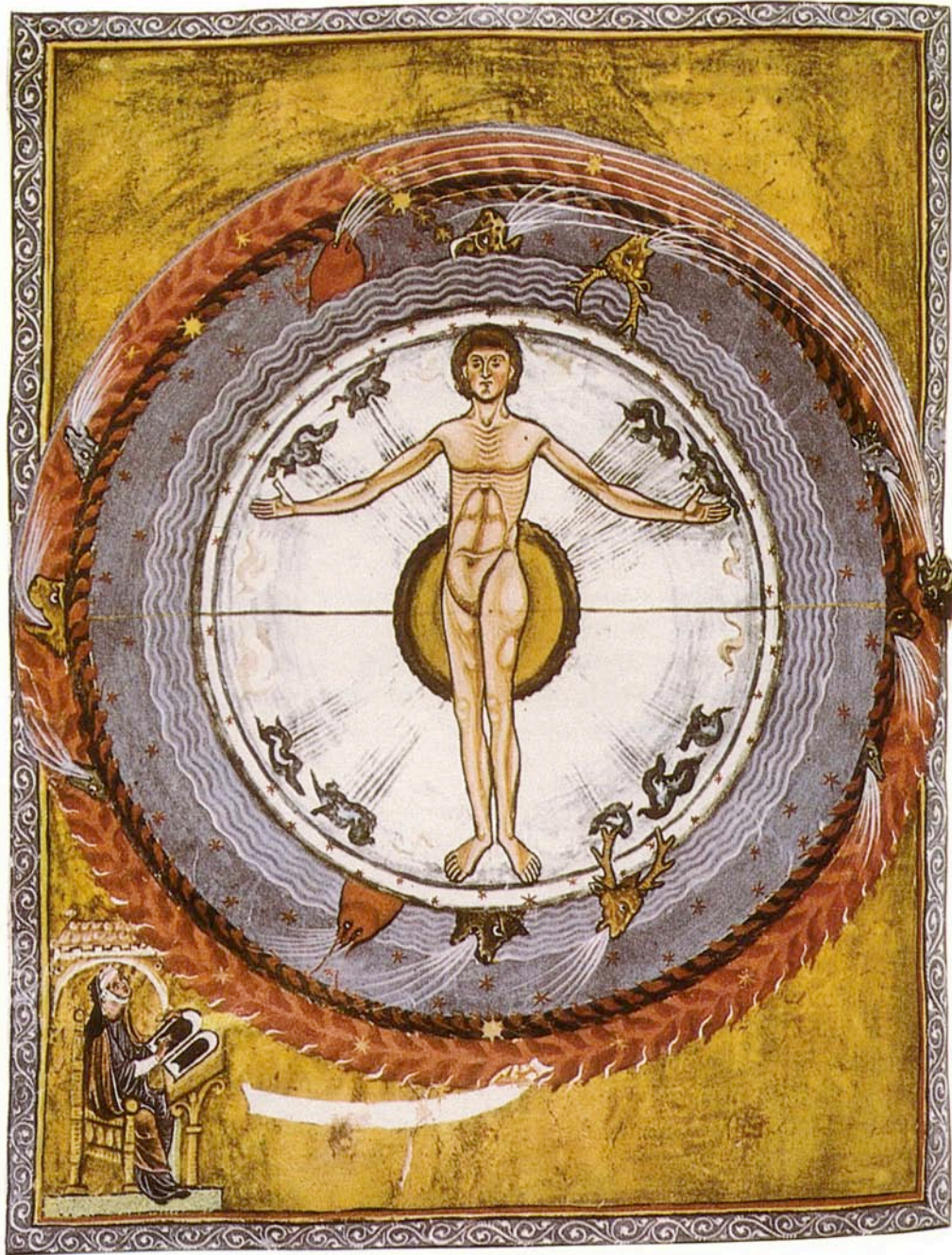


Plate 9.2.3.1: *Third Vision: On Human Nature*, (1163-1173)

Hildegard of Bingen

Mixed media on paper

(Fox, 1985:42)

This makes it clear that the circle represents the divine might, and the wind which has the power to weaken or strengthen human beings comes from the Holy Spirit. The strengthening mentioned in the this quotation refers to an additional strengthening property of the divine might, which affects the inner sense of the faithful, and is to be distinguished from the effects of the wind on the humours affecting physical and mental health.

9.2.4 Fourth Vision: On the Articulation of the Body

The Fourth Vision follows on from the last, with many of the same features illustrated in the vision's image, which is shown in Plate 9.2.4.1. This time though, the human being at the centre of the wheel is replaced by several people around the earth, which appears as an encircled cross. This vision explains in more detail from whence certain illnesses come. As an example of this, there is a fog which originates in the circle of sheer white clear air, discussed in the Second Vision. This fog spreads over the Earth causing a variety of illnesses and plague. The circle of watery air, however, "opposes this fog by holding it in check" (Fox, 1987:80). The result of this is a balancing effect, and the fog therefore does not cause "excessive harm to the creatures" (Fox, 1987:80).

The next reference to the circle is the orbit of the firmament, which is explained as "a metaphor of God's might, which has neither beginning nor end" (Fox, 1987:86). After this, the vision goes on to explain the human body as, in modern terms, a microcosm of the macrocosm (Fox, 1985). This commences with the top of a person's head, which is described as "Like the curvature of a revolving wheel" (Fox, 1987:89). Hildegard states that the head's crown, referring to the skull rather than a coronet, indicates

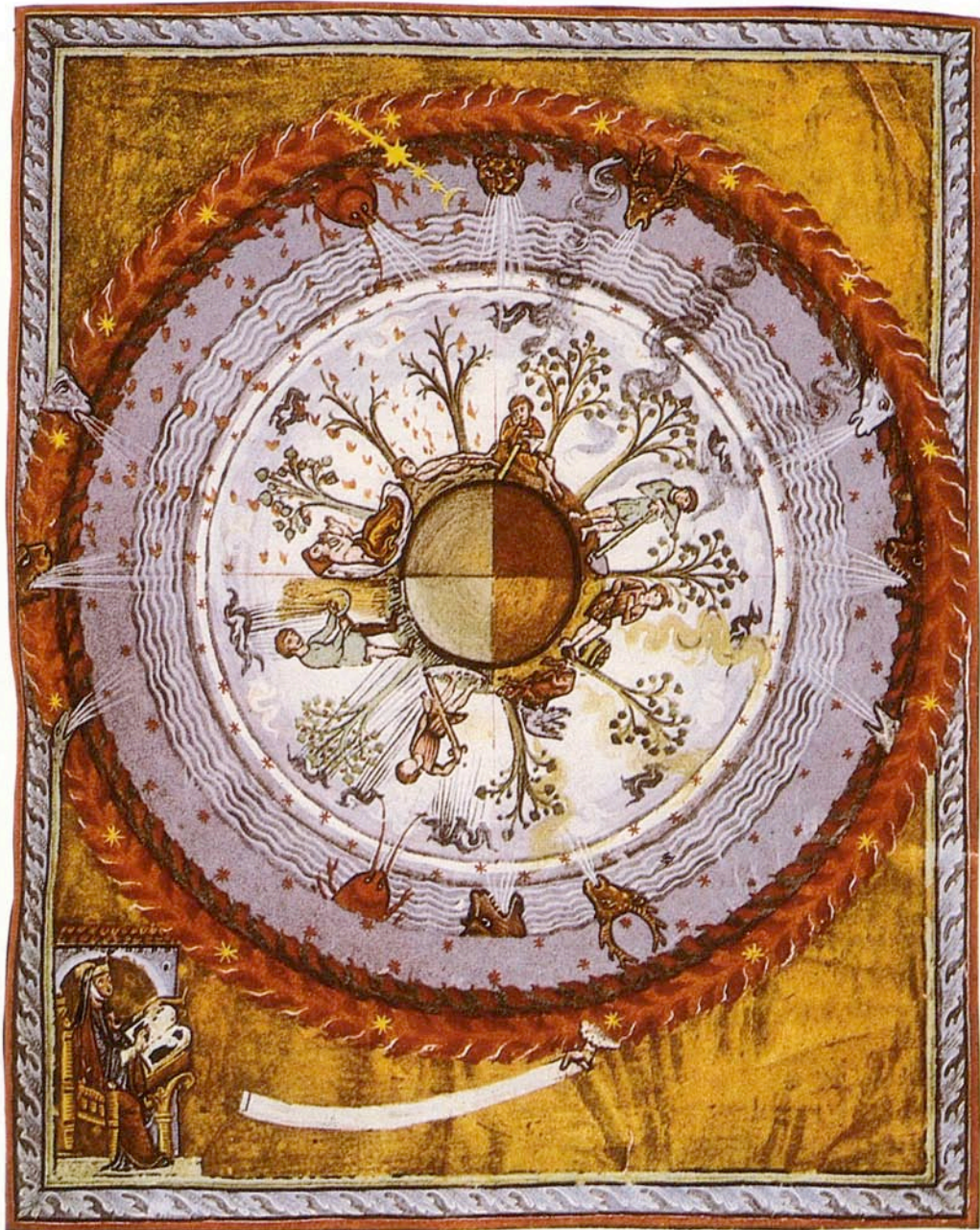


Plate 9.2.4.1: *Fourth Vision: On the Articulation of the Body*, (1163-1173)

Hildegard of Bingen

Mixed media on paper

(Fox, 1985:46)

... the beginning of the soul's action, which orders and plans all human deeds in accord with prudent reason. (Fox, 1987:90)

Further elaborating on the head's similarity with the firmament, Hildegard explains that the sphere of the skull "indicates the roundness of the firmament" (Fox, 1987:91), the balanced measurements of the former reflecting the same in the latter. The likeness of the head with the wheel of the cosmos is further explained in terms of the first four circles described in the Second Vision, which Hildegard here calls the "three upper elements." The luminous fire and upper black fire are accordingly "indicated by the space from our skull to the forehead." The space from the forehead to the end of the nose likewise relates to the circle of pure ether, and the circles of water air and sheer white luminous air are indicated "by the space from our nose to the throat" (Fox, 1987:92).

The sequential nature of the visions thus far in *De operatione Dei* means that the properties and associations described in the earlier visions remain present in those which have followed them, though unrepeated in the descriptions. The associations of the circles of the cosmos with the qualities and characteristics of God are therefore also associated with these proportions and spaces of the human head. The contemporary terms of microcosm and macrocosm may encapsulate the concept, but Hildegard explains the concept in advance of their introduction to speech with a clarity sufficient to define the terms.

9.2.5 Fifth Vision: The Places of Purification

The Fifth Vision is a section of *De operatione Dei* which describes what Hildegard calls "The Kingdom of the hereafter" (Fox, 1987:151). Since the previous vision showed the Earth at the centre of the cosmic wheel, the fact that Hildegard commences the description of this vision with "Then I saw the globe divided into five

areas ...” (Fox, 1987:152) suggests that this vision could be a further progression from the last, rather than a completely new and separate vision. Its appearance provides insight into this possibility since, though the image is as dominated by the form of a circle as the previous visions, the overall effect is markedly different, as can be seen in Plate 9.2.5.1. This makes it more likely that it is a new and separate vision than an extension of the preceding four.

The five parts into which Hildegard sees the Earth divided are the areas of the four cardinal points and a fifth in the centre. Hildegard’s explanation of this is that the Earth symbolises human beings, and the five parts account for the five human senses which strengthen the soul and bring it to salvation. In her own explanation of the vision which leads to the divulgence of this meaning, Hildegard states that

... the Earth, if it were rectangular instead of round, would have to have a weakness and inequality of weight at its corners.... For the four outer parts give to the Earth sufficient weight for its stability while the middle part maintains the Earth in this place.

(Fox, 1987:155)

The Earth’s circularity therefore refers to the balance of the human senses, which make the soul strong. To be sure that the reader has understood the message of her explanation of the vision, she synthesises it into a single sentence, stating that “All this should indicate that the body ... helps to preserve itself,” (Fox, 1987:158) adding that this compares with the way the soul organises one in a spiritual manner.

The next circle to be described within the vision is the first on the globe’s left, which, for Hildegard, is the vision’s east. Described as “a red ball surrounded by a sapphire circle,” its two lower wings “encircled and covered the Earth outside the

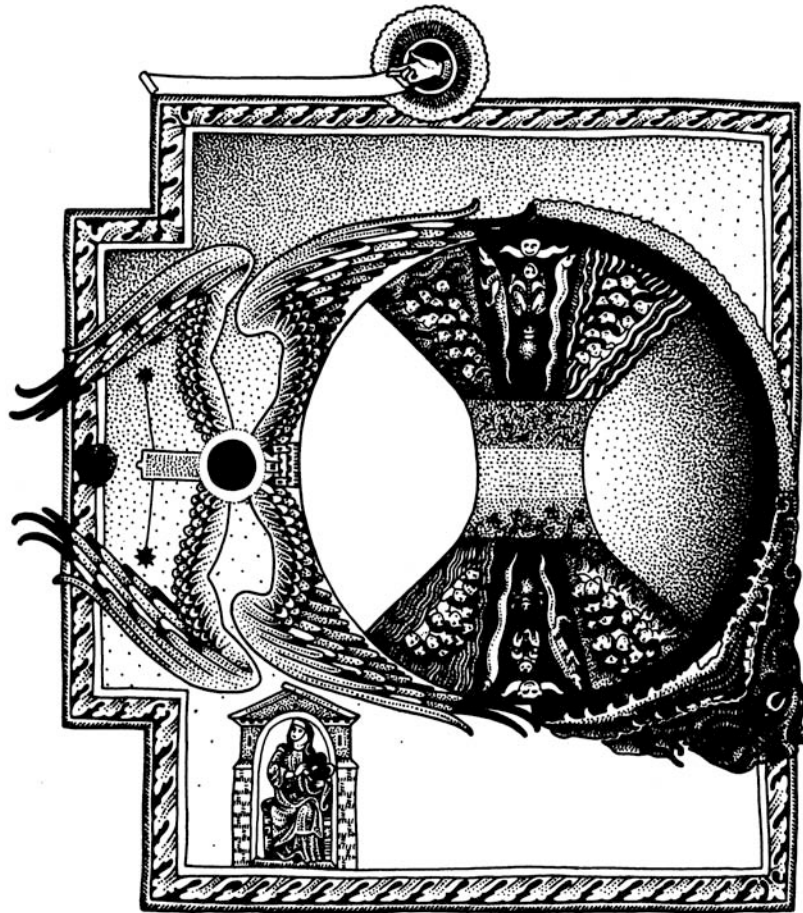


Plate 9.2.5.1: *Fifth Vision: The Places of Purification*, (1163-1173)

Hildegard of Bingen [monochrome reproduction by Werneke, A. (1987)]

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(Fox, 1987:152)

firmament” (Fox, 1987:154). In the vision’s image, the wings reach only half way round the Earth. Despite the wording of the text, this is evidently accurate, as Hildegard follows the account of these wings with the description of a red circle extending from the midpoint and encompassing the western part of the Earth.

The meaning given to the red ball surrounded by the sapphire circle is that the eastern area in which it is located symbolises “the origin of justice,” (Fox, 1987:166) though there is no explanation for this symbolism. The red circle embracing the west of the Earth represents the “fire of divine wrath,” which “punishes by correctly measuring judgment all who go beyond the circle of good works,” as well as the people who do not live within “the perfection of true faith” (Fox, 1987:167). The source of the fire of divine wrath is more readily identifiable in the red circle than is the origin of justice from the red ball surrounded by the sapphire circle.

The final circle described in the vision can almost be missed when one glances at the illustration. It is the small circle at the image’s far left, between the outer wing tips. This circle is described by Hildegard as “a fiery ball that shone in all directions” (Fox, 1987:154). Its meaning has been summarised by its translator, who believed the original to be “either redundant or repetitious” (Cunningham, 1987:2). The essence of the message left after this editing is that the fiery ball indicates “the gifts of the Holy Spirit,” (Fox, 1987:168) and the acquisition of power through virginity. One can only be grateful to the translator for making this so much clearer than the original is reported to be, and respect the strength of his convictions on the subject, since the heavenly voice quoted by Hildegard threatens any person who edits this work with being “blotted out of the book of life and out of all good fortune under the sun!” (Fox, 1987:266).

There is one more circle in the vision’s illustration, surrounding the hand at the top of the image. This hand shows a scroll of paper extending from it, which rolls along

the top of the image's border. The hand and the scroll receive no mention in the vision, and their position outside the vision's boundary makes it likely that they do not form part of it. With no comment from Hildegard regarding its depiction, this feature's interpretation has to be undertaken by the viewer. From the perspective of this author, looking at it more than eight hundred years after its creation and outside the context of medieval Catholic monastic life, the hand appears to illustrate the divine source which shows and explains the vision to Hildegard and directs her to make it public. The circle within which it is contained supports this, albeit based entirely on the context of Hildegard's previous visions, which have associated the circle with God on several occasions. This is confirmed by the scroll extending from the hand of the figure in the First Vision, shown in Plate 9.2.1.1.

9.2.6 Eighth Vision: On the Effect of Love

Vision Six commences the third section of the work with a further new vision, this time taking the form of a rectangular city. There are no references to any circle in its description or explanation, nor are there in the Seventh Vision. The Eighth Vision, however, shows a circular well on the top of the same rectangular city, as can be seen in Plate 9.2.6.1. There are three forms standing in or just outside this well, and the first of these is described as being

... encircled by such a purple glimmer and the second by such a dazzlingly white brilliance that I could not bear to look fully at them. (Fox, 1987:204)

The explanation of the vision is replaced by the speeches made by the three forms, and the symbolism of the circles surrounding these two forms are not included in their speeches. The first figure represents "Love, the splendor of the living God," (Fox, 1987:204) and makes a comment worthy of note in relation to why people have a



Plate 9.2.6.1: *Eighth Vision: On the Effect of Love*, (1163-1173)

Hildegard of Bingen [monochrome reproduction by Werneke, A. (1987)]

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(Fox, 1987:205)

demonstrated tendency to create circles as a means of resolving inner crises. The reference to the circle comes in the form of Hildegard's previous association of the soul with the shape of a sphere. The figure Love speaks of the powers of the soul, stating that

‘The human species has within its soul the ability to arrange everything according to its own wish.’ (Fox, 1987:204)

The figure Love also provides some explanation for the circular form of the well that is pictured in the vision. Thus, “the living well is also the Spirit of God,” (Fox, 1987:206) and is attributed the property of being a source of this Spirit in the same way that a well is the source of water. The circular form of the well in the vision is consistent with the image of God as a wheel in earlier visions, and this brings an entirely new meaning to the human form when the figure Love states that “the human species is completely the image of God ...” (Fox, 1987:207).

The traditional interpretation of the biblical reference to God creating man in His own image is that God looks like a man. Hildegard's vision here allows an alternative interpretation of the same statement. In the first instance, the figure Love refers to the entire human species, and not just the male half of it, with the unorthodox implication that women may also represent the image of God. Since God is referred to here as a circular well, and has been attributed circular forms in many of Hildegard's previous visions, the second implication is that a human being is also a circle – though obviously not in physical form. This presents no problem for the likeness though, since God is likewise not referred to in physical form.

9.2.7

Ninth Vision: Completion of the Cosmos

The image of the Ninth Vision²¹, illustrated in Plate 9.2.7.1, shows the rectangular city from the previous three visions, including a circular building which could be the well from the Eighth Vision, though it receives no mention in the vision's description. In fact, there is no direct reference to a circle which features in the vision's illustration, and those which do appear in the image are not described as circles in the vision's text.

The first reference to a circle comments only on the properties of the shape. Since Hildegard has, in previous visions, used the qualities of circles to indicate their presence in the visions, it is worth noting that the figure in the lower left of the image is identified as the "Wisdom of true rapture, a Wisdom whose beginning and end are beyond human reason" (Fox, 1987:212).

Hildegard's second reference to circles in this vision owes its identification to the vision's illustration. The five circles on the wings of the figure to the right of the last are described and explained in the text, but are given no clear indicator alerting the modern day reader to their distinct shape. These five circles are instead described as being five mirrors. This is the second instance out of three in which Hildegard refers to mirrors which appear as circles within the vision's illustration.

These mirrors bear inscriptions which commence with "The Way and the Truth" and continue to impart similarly Godly messages. The second reads "I am the doorway to all of God's mysteries," the third is inscribed with "I point the way to everything that is good," on the fourth is written "I am the mirror in which are seen the good intentions

²¹ The illustration shown in Plate 9.2.7.1 is that which accompanies the translation of the Tenth Vision in Fox's (1987) translation of *De operatione Dei*. The descriptions of the visions, combined with their appearance, make it very clear to this author that the illustrations have been confused in his edition. The illustration which accompanies his translation of the Ninth Vision is equally clearly that which ought to appear along side the Tenth Vision, and so this author has chosen to rectify this discrepancy and associate the illustrations with the visions which describe their content.

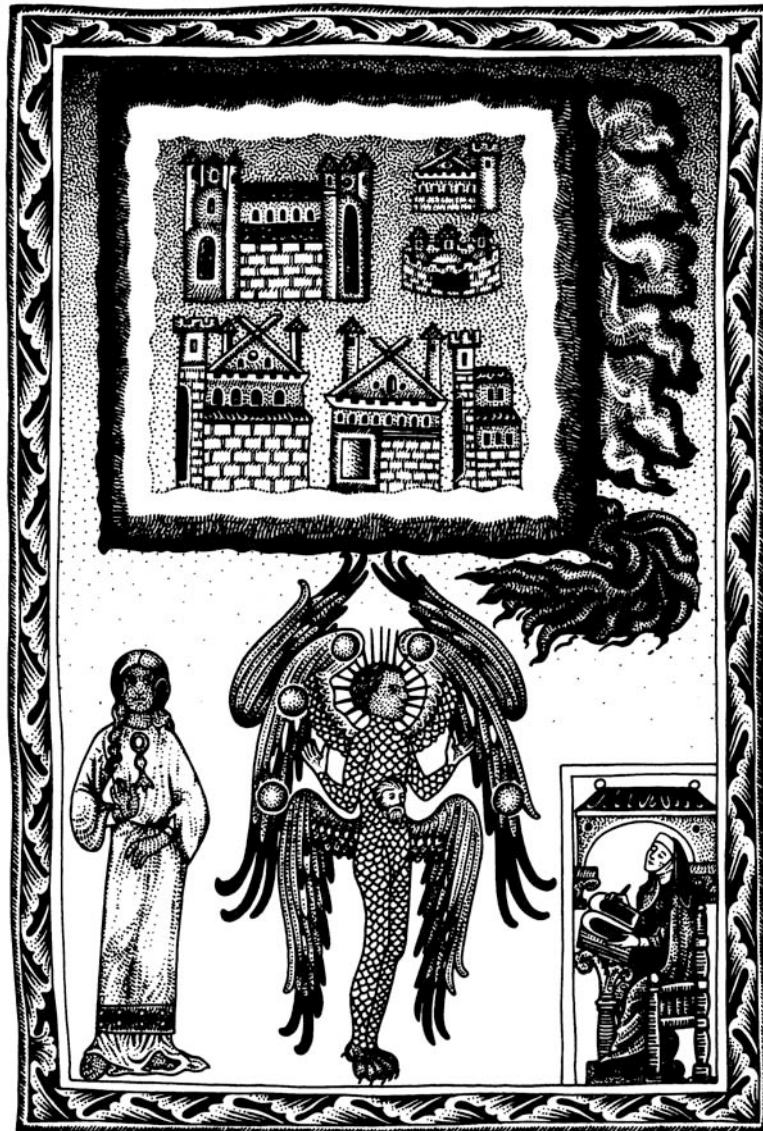


Plate 9.2.7.1: *Ninth Vision: Completion of the Cosmos*, (1163-1173)

Hildegard of Bingen [monochrome reproduction by Werneke, A. (1987)]

Mixed media on paper

(Fox, 1987:223)

of the elect,” and on the fifth and final mirror is the message “Tell us if you are the One who is to rule over the people of Israel” (Fox, 1987:210).

The mirrors are also indicative of the salvation brought by “Abel, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and the Son of God,” (Fox, 1987:216) respectively. These are further associated with significant properties or events. The first is thus symbolic of the fear of God, the second with “the great miracle of creation,” the third with Jesus’ birth, the fourth with the fear of God again as well as “the Incarnation,” (Fox, 1987:216) and the fifth is indicative of love. These small circles thus represent significant spiritual concepts which are evidently more important than the specification of their shape.

The bizarre creature on which these circles are placed is indicative of God, who though not pictured as a circle, continues to be described in terms of the shape’s qualities, as Hildegard explains that “... God is the splendor that has never had a beginning and will never have an end” (Fox, 1987:213). The second head of this image is also associated with the shape of the circle, as it is indicative of God’s decision regarding humanity’s redemption. This decision is described as revealing

... the high dignity of a rectitude ... that no one can measure or even grasp, just as no human being can distinguish the beginning of a wheel from its end when it is revolving. (Fox, 1987:213)

A further reference to circles occurs in the speech of the heavenly voice which Hildegard hears explaining the vision. It explains that, because God wished “to bring humanity back to the bliss of heaven,” He showed humanity “everything existing in the heavenly, earthly, and subterranean spheres” (Fox, 1987:212). This has a faintly healing association brought by the relationship between the spheres and God’s wish for

humanity to reside in heaven once more, which would constitute a healing effect on the lives of everybody.

The final reference to the circle within this vision's description is the comparison of the manner in which

... God is known through faith, just as the circumference of the sun can be detected by an attentive eye. (Fox, 1987:220)

The attentive eye thus represents faith, which distinguishes the circumference of the sun which represents the knowledge of God. As a simple metaphor it conveys a surprising amount of information regarding the circle's association. The eyes through which the faithful see (as are those of any person) are round. The ability to see the shape sought is indicative of the knowledge which stems from this faith, and the circumference of the sun represents God as a circle whose shape is not immediately obvious to the eye, but which illuminates and warms the world. The fact that in the present day it is known that looking directly at the sun causes damage to the retina and can cause blindness is not considered here to be one of Hildegard's intended associations. Were she aware of the fact, it is the opinion of this author that Hildegard would have written it into her explanation somehow; most likely as relating to the blinding power of God.

9.2.8 Tenth Vision: On the End of Time

The Tenth Vision is the final vision documented by Hildegard in *De operatione Dei*. The rectangular city once again appears, and receives little mention from Hildegard. To its left, there appears a large circle, as can be seen in Plate 9.2.8.1. Inside this circle is a figure, and there is another circle above the illustration outside of the illuminated border. The large circle which is described in Hildegard's text appears as an encircled cross, and is described as "a wheel of wonderful size that resembled a dazzling white cloud" (Fox, 1987:222). In this final vision, Hildegard explains that

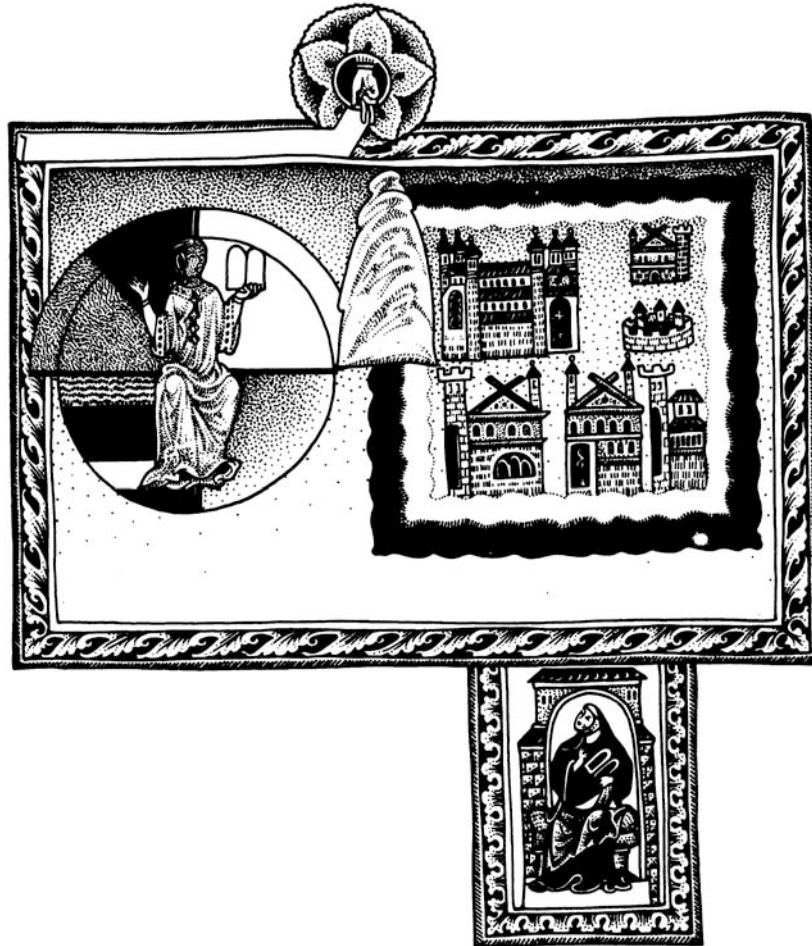


Plate 9.2.8.1: *Tenth Vision: On the End of Time*, (1163-1173)

Hildegard of Bingen [monochrome reproduction by Werneke, A. (1987)]

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(Fox, 1987:211)

“The wheel signifies the one eternal God,” (Fox, 1987:405) who is once more described as being without beginning or end.

The lines which segment the wheel are described as representing some of the more subtle qualities of God, such as the dark horizontal line’s illustration of “God’s intent to separate the temporal from the eternal” at the end of the time²². Another of the lines represents “the cosmic order” (Fox, 1987:244). A third is significant of the creative nature of all people, and there is a reddish glow which is not clear in the monochrome reproduction, but which indicates the fate of faithful souls at the end of time. The half of the wheel under the line, which is described as displaying “a whitish color mixed with black,” (Fox, 1987:222) and is therefore readily identifiable within the image, represents “distress over the decline of earthly things” (Fox, 1987:225) at the end of time.

The figure within the wheel is identified to Hildegard as the image of Love from her earlier vision. The significance of this is that

Love is quietly attached, so to speak, to God’s will in that perfection by which God’s power overcomes everything. For love fulfills [*sic*] every wish of God. (Fox, 1987:226)

Though God is already associated with the wheel in its entire representation, this adds a healing quality. The power to overcome everything is placed within the circle, which is also associated with the quality of perfection.

The final reference to the shape of the circle in the text is a description of a circle’s movement. Eternity is discussed by Hildegard who explains that, before the beginning of the world, eternity had no origin. After the end of the world, according to

²² The description of this wheel provides the conclusive proof that the images of the final visions had been interchanged in Fox’s (1987) translation of *De operatione Dei*. The winged image of God in Plate 9.2.7.1 supports this conclusion, however, it is the details of the lines within this wheel which unarguably describe those pictured in Plate 9.2.8.1, and justify this author’s rectification of their order.

Hildegard, it will also have no end. The conclusion she draws in relation to the end of the world is that

... the world's beginning and end will be enclosed, so to speak,
in a unique cycle of understanding. (Fox, 1987:225)

The concept of eternity continuing to have no beginning or end even after the end of time is just within the grasp of the human mind. This author concedes that the unique cycle of understanding in which the world's beginning and end will be enclosed at the end of time may possibly be unique to Hildegard.

Hildegard concludes the documentation and illustration of her visions with one last circle, which is the hand extending from the circle at the top of the image, showing a hand emitting a scroll as in the Fifth Vision of this work. In its second appearance, it appears contained within a five petalled flower within the circle. Hildegard makes no reference to it in the vision's description yet, since it is positioned outside of the image's border it could be that it does not represent any part of the vision. She certainly does not describe herself, yet her portrait is also included in the image's lower right. Instead, it is as though Hildegard invites independent thought in the reader, to consider the potential significance of the circle, the flower, the hand and the scroll.

To this author, it certainly appears to illustrate the manner in which Hildegard considers God to be the source of her visions, handed to her to record and share. It is precisely the fact that Hildegard undertook the task which prompts this conclusion, which is largely based on the associations of the circles within her visions. This is, as for the similar circle atop the Fifth Vision, confirmed by the scroll in the hand of the figure of the First Vision.

Upon completing a reading of Hildegard's visions, it is evident that the circle plays a significant role in their content, both visually and in terms of the concepts,

properties and qualities with which it is associated. The circles featured in Hildegard's visions are thus of great value to this research as an example of the psychic occurrence of the shape which has not, until now, been explored in relation to the circle's associations with spiritual healing. The comparison of the properties, qualities and attributions associated with the circle by Hildegard (which are independent of the influence of Jung's (1973) widely acclaimed theories and a global awareness of other spiritual belief systems) with the primary cultural contexts of its association with healing discussed in Chapters Three, Four and Five, thus offer a high likelihood of fresh insight into the circle's relationship with healing.