



## Between Heaven and Earth: the Symbolism of the Angelic Realm, with Reference to Christian Art

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this article is to examine two significant symbolic systems relevant to the meaning of angels in Christian art. In the first part, a brief overview of Christian angelology is given in order to contextualise the close link between Christian art and angelology. The belief in angels, as well as the ways in which they have been depicted was shaped by means of various influences found in winged antique prototypes. The belief in beings existing in the intermediary realm between heaven and earth originated more than two millennia before CE. In this regard the research focuses on the influence of Egyptian, Babylonian, Sumerian and Persian belief systems and more especially on the way in which figures depicted with wings were assimilated in the iconography of Christian art. The vertical movement and flamelike, mystical being of angels became distinctive motifs in Italian Renaissance art. The second part of the article is devoted to the angelic hierarchy which was conceived and represented as a remarkably geometric system. In conclusion, reasons are proposed for the disappearance of angels from Western art.*

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### Abstrak

*Die doel met hierdie artikel is om twee belangrike sisteme wat op die betekenis van engele in Christelike kuns betrekking het, te ondersoek. In die eerste deel word 'n bondige uiteensetting van die Christelike engele leer gegee ten einde die nou verband tussen Christelike kuns en leerstellings insake engele te kontekstualiseer. Die geloof in engele, sowel as die wyses waarop hulle afgebeeld is, is beïnvloed deur verskeie antieke prototipes van gevlerkte figure. Die geloof in wesens wat in 'n sfeer tussen die hemel en die aarde sou bestaan het, het sy oorsprong meer as twee millenia voor ons gemeenskaplike era. In hierdie verband is Egiptiese, Babiloniese, Sumeriese en Persiese geloofstelsels ondersoek, en daar is veral klem gelê op die wyse waarop figure met vlerke in die ikonografie van Christelike kuns geassimileer is. Die vertikale beweging en vlamagtige, mistieke verskyningsvorme van engele is tipies van die wyse waarop hulle as motiewe in Italiaanse Renaissancekuns voorgestel is. Die tweede deel van die artikel handel oor die engelehiërargie wat as 'n merkwaardige geometriese stelsel gekonsipieer en voorgestel is. Ten slotte word daar redes aangevoer vir die verdwyning van engele uit die Westerse kuns.*

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## Part I: Christian angelology and art

### Introductory remarks

In Isaiah 6: 1-10, the prophet describes a vision of the Lord sitting on a throne, surrounded by seraphim, each with six wings, who are forever praising and serving Him (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> This points to an interpretation of angels that H.J. Richards (1973: 97) formulates as follows: “Angels never speak about themselves, only about God. We do not know what angels are, only what they mean: the majesty and the transcendence, the protection and the revelation of God.” It also points to a twofold representation of angels, namely the *Sanctus* and the wing (Mach 1992: 35), of which the latter will be the main focus of the first part of this article.



Fig. 1 Detail of Seraphim. From a fresco by Pietro Cavallini (1273-1308), in St Cecilia, Rome.

The word “angels” is often used to refer collectively to celestial beings. However, the term “an-

gels” also embraces seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominations, virtues, powers, prince-doms, and archangels (fig. 2). In traditional Christian theology, it has been accepted that “*The Angels in heaven all differ, and are almost infinite in number, because through infinite variety they become representative of God’s beauty*” (Vonier 1939: 257).

From time immemorial, in religions both primitive and sophisticated, there have always been ways in which humankind could approach the Divine. Conversely, the Divine, or the gods and goddesses, could, and did, approach humankind:



Fig. 2 Archangel Michael and a warrior angel. Detail from a woodcut by Albrecht Dürer’s *Apocalypse*, 1498.

either openly or manifestly, or in changed shapes and disguises.

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<sup>1</sup> All the illustrations are by Carla Wasserthal. They were redrawn from various sources, mainly those quoted in the bibliography, and photographs in the possession of the author. Copyright on the drawings resides with Carla Wasserthal.

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In Christian and Jewish belief, one also encounters the idea of the “angel” – derived from the Greek word *ángelos*, literally meaning “messenger”. In the sacred scriptures, messengers are usually, but not always, encountered as superterrestrial beings, i.e. messengers from God. D. Irvin (1978: 103) postulates that:

*[T]here took place in Israel a development from a primitive concept of God and his habits of communicating directly with men, to a transcendent idea of God for whom direct communication with men would be unworthy, whose transcendence was best expressed by the concept of an intermediary, that is, an angel.*

6 In the Old Testament tradition, the *mal’ak*, used for both human and angelic messengers, has a special commission to help guide Israel or individual Israelites (*Exodus* 14: 19; *Numbers* 22: 22; *1 Kings* 19: 7). In this regard G. von Rad (1985: 13) states:

*[Mal’ak] is not so much a mere messenger as an instrument of the covenant and personification of divine aid ... . Sometimes he is so closely identified with God as to be almost indistinguishable. He is God, as it were, entering human apperception (cf. the alternation in *Genesis* 21: 17ff).*

In the Christian tradition, it has generally been accepted that angels are messengers which God sends to earth, while the human messenger is less important than in the Hebrew tradition, as exemplified in *Isaiah* 6: 8: “I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send ... ? Then said I, here I am, send me.”

Further biblical evidence leads to the conclusion that angels fulfil a variety of tasks, such as those listed below, paraphrased from R.P. Pullan (1886: 318):

1. They are beings of a higher nature than humans and are gifted with superior intelligence.
2. They act as a host of attendants around the Throne of God, and as a kind of celestial court or counsel.
3. They are messengers who convey His Will from heaven to earth, or are sent to guide, correct, instruct, reprove, and console human beings.
4. They protect the pious.
5. They punish by the command of the most High the wicked and disobedient.
6. They sometimes show themselves in human form, eating and drinking, or using a sword.
7. They have the power to kill.

It is also generally accepted that, of all the heavenly hosts, only angels and archangels visit the earth to deliver God’s messages to His people, and to protect believers. According to biblical evidence they were present and ministered to Christ in some of the crucial moments during His life on earth, especially during His birth and resurrection.

The Church Fathers ascribed various meanings to the being of angels. An important one was a threefold function that linked them symbolically to the concept of light, namely that “of giving light, which is the highest function; that of receiving light and giving it again, which is the second or intermediary function; and that of receiving it, without giving it to another angelic spirit” (Vonier 1939: 257).

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The light which radiates from God thus formed a link between spiritual beings and established their hierarchy in the great chain of being which culminates in God.

However, angels were never considered divine, nor could they ever be. In this sense, Christianity (like Judaism and, later, Islam) divides sharply from the older religions of Egypt, the Celts, Greece, Rome, and many others. Christianity is ultimately always rigidly monotheistic: no-one, and nothing, can become divine. One may partake of divinity through the mediatorship of Christ. But in the ancient religions of Egypt and Greece, for example, there existed rites – dangerous and awesome as they might have been – whereby, for a time, one could actually become the god or goddess. But the monotheistic religions know nothing of gods and goddesses. For them, there is only **ONE GOD**.

### Antique prototypes of the winged Christian angel

Before discussing those winged figures which could be identified as prototypes of the winged Christian angel, the sun-disk as a winged object deserves mention (fig. 3).

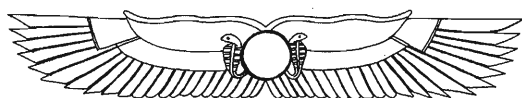


Fig. 3 Egyptian winged sun-disk, symbol of the Sun-god.



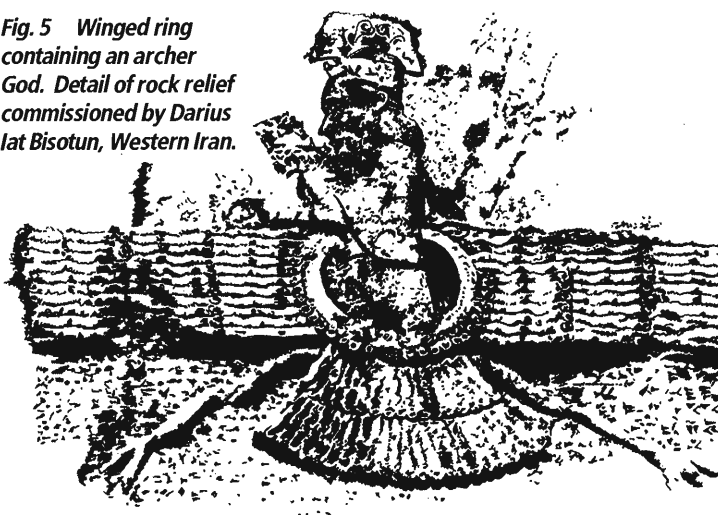
Fig. 4 Winged Babylonian genii figures flanking a winged ring hovering above the tree of life.

This symbol, probably dating from the second millennium before CE, is an Egyptian creation (Pering 1932: 281), representing the sun in flight. It appears above the entrances of Egyptian temples, where, as H. Brugsch (1869: 173) states, it is placed exactly in the centre of the façades.

The "sun bird" symbol migrated to Persia and also influenced the Phoenicians, Assyrians and Hittites, probably during the 9th century before CE. In the Babylonian cultural milieu its iconography changed. It appears above the tree of life, often combined with a star (Venus), and flanked by winged genii figures (fig. 4). In time, the cir-

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Fig. 5 Winged ring containing an archer God. Detail of rock relief commissioned by Darius I at Bisotun, Western Iran.



cle of the sun disk became a winged ring containing an archer god, most probably Ahuramazda (fig. 5). Both in times of war and peace this symbol hovered above the king, as



*Fig. 6 The god in a winged ring from a relief depicting Assurnasiraplis II. From an Assyrian relief in the British Museum.*

depicted in various Assyrian friezes (fig. 6), and can be interpreted as "a sort of guardian angel of the king" (Root 1979: 301).

The winged figures in Assyrian art (fig. 7) were probably derived from those of Egypt. It was most probably in Egypt that human figures obtained wings, for example, the goddess Isis (fig. 8). The goddess Nephthys is also "seen to be constructed on a comparatively natural plan, the bird-feathered wings being attached below the arms and moved by them" (Tylor 1890: 383).



*Fig. 7 An Assyrian human-bodied figure with four wings, most probably portraying Ahura Mazda in angelic form. Relief from Khorsabad, now in the Louvre, Paris.*



*Fig. 8 The Egyptian goddess Isis depicted on the base of Tutankhamen's second coffin. Egyptian Museum, Cairo.*

Many hybrid figures which were partly human, partly animal, acquired wings, such as the Greek sphinx. These composite figures influenced the Assyrian craftsmen who sculpted monster-animals of which the best known examples are the man-headed, winged bull figures placed as guardian figures at city gates. Also in Assyria and Persia, quasi-human figures (fig. 9), either with



*Fig. 9 A human-headed, winged bull figure, derived from an Assyrian source. From a relief at Persepolis.*

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human or bird heads, were depicted with stylised wings, "in which all scruples as to anatomical possibility are set to nought" (Tylor 1890: 384). The best known examples are the genius figures protecting the king. These figures who wear one or two pairs of wings can be taken as "symbols in a religious picture-writing, indicating that the divine beings who wear them can freely traverse space" (Tylor 1890: 384). However, J. Langbein (1881: 31, 39) points out that they never fly.

The Pasargadae "Genius" (fig. 10), a palace relief, is a most sophisticated depiction of a Near Eastern winged figure, which, according to M.C. Root (1979: 303), remains enigmatic. But – whether it represents a syncretic deity, some metaphorical vision of an abstract idea of imperial domain, or a vision of Cyrus himself in a mythical aspect of ideal kingship – the Pasargadae "Genius" is an Achaemenid creation emerging from, and responding to, the demands of empire as Cyrus saw them.

Angels play only a restricted role in Israelite tradition prior to the time of the Babylonian exile. However, when the Israelites returned from Egypt to the Promised Land, the winged beings represented on the ark of the covenant described in Leviticus may have been Egyptian inspired.

R.C. Briggs (1981: 36) points out that the Israel-



Fig. 10 An Achaemenid relief at Palace R, Pasargadae, called the Pasargadae "Genius".

ite experience in Babylonian exile affected their concept of angels in two respects:

*[I]t stimulated the development of strict monotheism – a perspective which led to the concept of angels as mediators – and it provided access to Iranian and Babylonian terminology and cosmology to express the concept of angels.*

This is clear from the reading of cuneiform texts by F. Delitzsch and the Babel-Bibel school which, D. Irvin (1978: 101) explains, made these researchers "familiar with the very common Mesopotamian idea by which the heavenly court, in particular, the highest god, was conceived of as having a messenger". Irvin (1979: 104) offers further insight into this cosmology:

*The life of the gods in the ancient Near Eastern stories is depicted as passing, for the most part, in a court located in the sky. The divine messenger carries messages to and from this court; he leaves on errands and returns. The manner of his reaching this court, in spite of its inaccessible location, is usually*

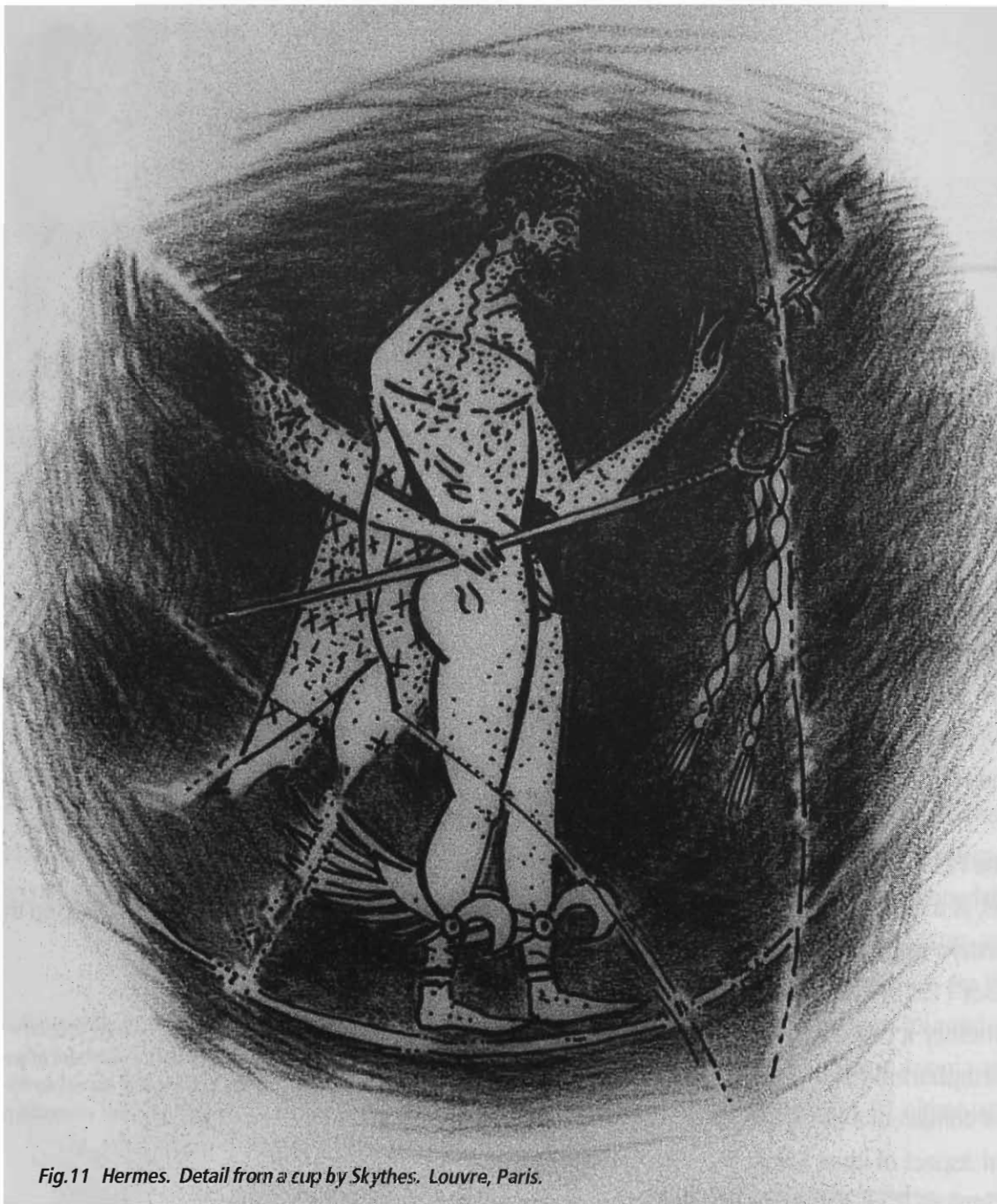


Fig.11 Hermes. Detail from a cup by Skythes. Louvre, Paris.

not made explicit. However, in the few descriptions we have, Adapa is led up a road to the gate of heaven, and the messenger Kaka is going up and down the long stairway of heaven, at the top of which is a gate, leading into the celestial court. It is this concept of the heavenly court, and this view of the divine messengers, that Jacob sees in the E story of Genesis 28. But here the messengers play no role in the plot, and significantly, no one has ever suggested that the mal'akim in this passage are interpolated.

According to Irvin (1978: 103) the belief in a superhuman and celestial being called an angel can be taken for granted in the post-exilic period. The Israelites' expression of the concept of the angel remained mainly literary because of their belief in an iconoclastic God. They seldom, if ever, depicted winged human beings. Old Testament stories were later illustrated by Christian artists.

In the Greek and Hellenistic world the *ángelos* is a messenger. According to Grundmann (1985:

12) his role was sacral and he was protected by the gods. The messenger delivered the message, answered questions and asked for a reward. He could also be employed as an envoy, making treatises.

Messengers are generally depicted as winged beings in Greek art. Examples are the Hermes, Niké, Eros and Genius figures, whose attributes are briefly discussed below.

Hermes, the son of Zeus, is the most prominent heavenly messenger, i.e. the messenger of the Olympians (fig. 11). He was named Angelos (Hammond & Scullard 1970: 64). Not the least of his gifts was the ability to play beautifully on the lyre. Zeus made him herald to the gods and the guide of the dead into Hades. His usual attributes are his golden sandals, a hat and a staff, called a caduceus, all of these ornamented with wings (Peck 1964: 799-800). In Classical literature Mercury, the Roman counterpart of Hermes, was the god of eloquence and the go-between (*interpres*) of the gods, and his straight wand was seen to be a token of his upright speech (Holberton 1982: 206). Moreover, C.G. Jung (1943 204-5) describes Mercury (fig. 12) as a "*spiritus visibilis, tamen impalpabilis*" (a visible, yet not tangible spirit), and also as "*spiritus prae cunctis valde purus*" (a most pure spirit).

With regard to Mercury, F. Gets (1978: 59) notes that in Renaissance iconography:



Fig. 12 Mercury. Detail from *Musaeum Hermeticum Reformatum et Amplificatum*, Frankfurt, 1678.

*[He] personifies many human and celestial traits, but among the most important are those linked with the idea of "communication with the gods", for which the symbolic aspect are the wings on his feet which associate him with both the ethereal realms, and with the earth itself.*

Niké was the Greek goddess of Victory (fig. 13). In Classical art, she was generally represented as winged, dressed in a long robe, holding a

Fig. 13 Niké. Antique stucco found in the Farnesina gardens. Museo Nazionale, Rome.





wreath and/or a palm branch as the prize or prizes for victors in combat or games (Ziegler & Sontheimer 1977: 100-1). As the herald of victory, she also bore the wand of Hermes (Peck 1963: 1096). According to K. Felís (1912: 3), the development of the various types of winged angels in early Christian art derived from the Hellenistic Niké. This influence was most probably derived via Roman depictions of Victory figures.

Eros was the god of love among the Greeks whom Hesiod considered to be the fairest of the deities (fig. 14). Zeus armed him with golden wings as well as a bow and arrows. The Roman god, Amor or Cupido, was a conflation with the Greek Eros (Peck 1963: 623). Angels in the form of children or *putti* appeared in northern European art; however, during the Renaissance in Italy, the *erotes* prototype was revived, but in this, the figures were mostly reduced to a mere winged head.

Fig. 14 Eros. Statuette from the 1st century BC. British Museum, London.



In Roman mythology, Genius, believed to be winged, but seldom depicted, was regarded as a higher power which creates and maintains life. In antiquity, the most prominent role attributed to Genius was that of a tutelary deity and every mortal had a *genius* assigned to him/her at birth. Considering that every individual was closely accompanied by his or her *genius*, JJ Sheridan (1980: 60) remarks that the theories on the good Genius would have been quite intelligible to medieval Christians who adhered to the teaching on Guardian Angels.

Many other figures in Classical art are depicted as winged, such as Iris, who was Hera's messenger, and Fate, to name only two. Collectively these messenger figures gave rise to emblematic figures, such as Father Time, who were also represented as winged.

### The winged Christian angel

Like the seraphim (fig. 15), who cover themselves with wings (Isaiah 6: 2), there are also biblical references to cherubim as winged beings (Exodus 25: 18-20; 1 Kings 6: 23-28). However, there are few references in the Bible to angels that fly, since biblical messengers have no wings (Mach 1992: 196). Only in the following examples is flight mentioned, namely Revelations 14: 6: "Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven"; and Daniel 9: 21, in which the

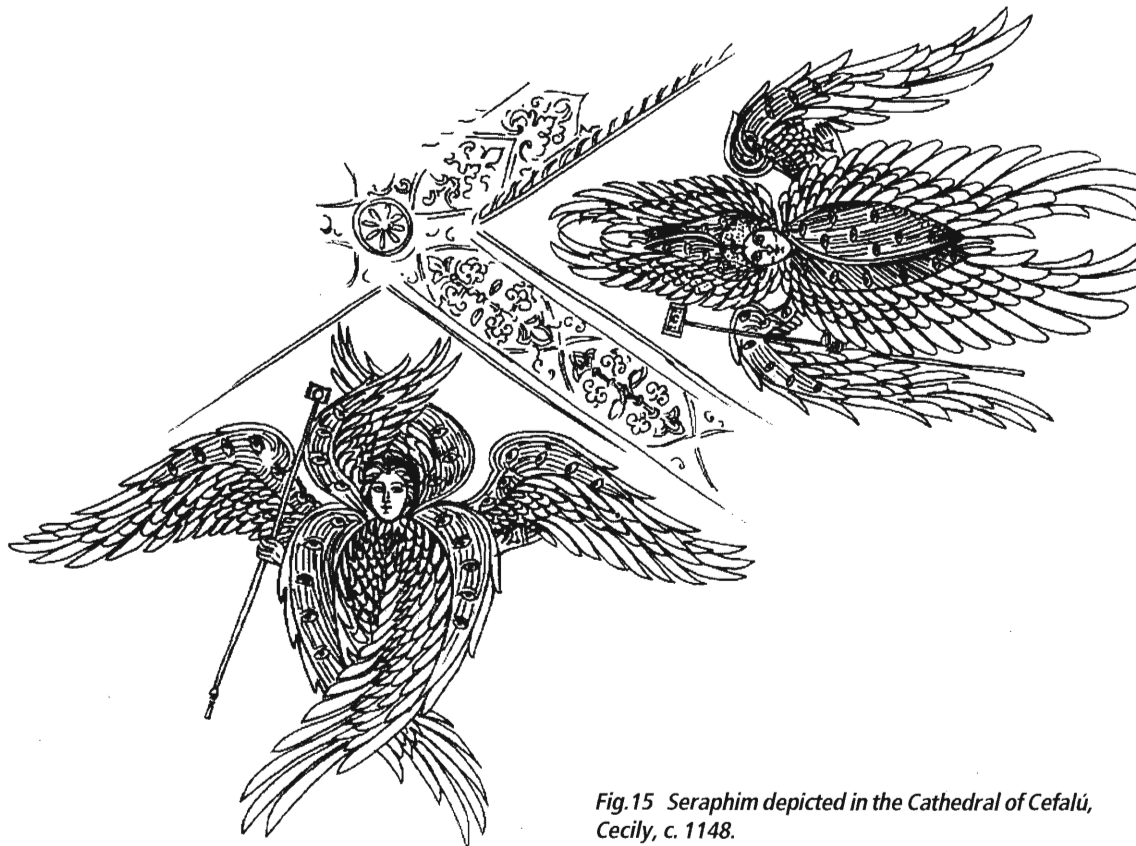


Fig.15 Seraphim depicted in the Cathedral of Cefalù, Cecily, c. 1148.

phrase “born in swift flight” is used to describe the approach of the angel Gabriel which may best be rendered as “caused to fly swiftly” (Montgomery 1964: 370). A. Lacocque (1979: 190) nevertheless points out the truth that “this text does not say whether the angel seen by Daniel was or was not winged.” In addition to the Book of Daniel, the earliest attestation of flying angels is in the *Similitudes of Enoch* 61: 1: “Long cords were given to those angels, and they acquired wings for themselves, and flew” (Collins 1993: 352). However, there are references to angels ascending and descending in the New Testament: “an angel of the Lord descending from heaven” (Matthew 28: 2), and “the angels of God ascending and descending” (John 1: 51). Consequently, wings were not always attributes of angelic figures in early Christian iconography, even though Tertullian, a Latin Church Father of the second century expressed the view that: “Every spirit is possessed of wings. This is a com-

mon property of both angels and demons” (*Apology*, Chap. 22, quoted from Landsberger 1947: 250).

In the time before Constantine the Great (280-337 AD), angels were presented as wingless youths, probably following Mark 16: 5 and Luke 24: 4. An example of this kind of representation is the Annunciation scene in the catacomb of Priscilla in Rome. G. Stuhlfauth (1897: 9) remarks about this kind of angel that they were

*also reinmenschlich dargestellt, so wird im einzelnen Falle der in rein menschlicher Gestalt erscheinende Engel als solcher nie ohne weiteres zu erkennen sein ...?*

Only in about 400 AD were wings added to figures representing angels, and thereafter Christian artists were inclined to depict angels consistently as winged human beings. The origin of the motif of the winged angel in Christian

<sup>2</sup> ... [R]epresented in purely human form, so that in individual cases the apparition would not be automatically recognisable for what it is ... (All translations are the author’s own.)



Fig. 16 A typical depiction of the motif of winged, hovering angels holding the emblem of Christ.

art, described by G Berefelt (1968: 23), is that of a "hovering" being. In (fig. 16) two winged beings are depicted in a horizontal, hovering position, holding a Christian emblem on either side. The Classical winged Niké figure was probably used as a prototype for this early Christian winged angel, which A.C.M. Beck (1936: 1) describes as follows:

*Dieser neue Engeltypus setzt sich bald derart durch, dass fast sämtliche Engelsbilder in ihm dargestellt werden, selbst die alten antiken Schemen der paarweise schwebend oder stehend einen Kranz oder ein Medaillon haltenden Niken.<sup>3</sup>*

The presentation of winged angels capable of hovering or of flight is thus derived from the Niké or Roman Victory figures. This gave rise to a type of female angel, most often depicted with one leg extended and an undraped breast (Beck 1936: 2, 23). Nevertheless, the male type of angel, which Beck (1936: 23) calls a "Neuschöpfung der christlichen Zeit" [an invention of the Christian era], predominated in Christian art. Contrary to the female type of angel which was based on the Niké figure, the prototype of the male type was the Genius figure. During the thirteenth century angels were depicted as robed like deacons and as male beings, following the Genius prototype, although late medieval artists often gave them youthful female countenances (Beck 1936: 8).

Hermes or Mercury figures, which were always presented in Classical times as carrying a messenger's staff, probably became the prototype for the angel bearing a staff, often crowned with a globe and a cross. In Byzantine art, the archan-



Fig. 17 Archangel Gabriel. Detail of the Gent altarpiece by Jan and Hubert van Eyck.

gels Michael and Gabriel answer to this description (fig. 17), the latter occurring frequently in representations of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary holding a long-stemmed lily.

<sup>3</sup> The conceptualisation of this new type of angel was a composite of virtually the entire range of pre-existing representations of angels, down to the ancient depictions of pairs of Nikés shown in a hovering or standing posture and holding a wreath or medaillon.

## The meaning of the wing and vertical movement

In artistic representations the wing symbolises flight or ascent as a victory over the bonds of earthly existence that human beings yearn for but are not equipped to achieve as a physical accomplishment. According to Plato's *Phaedrus* (1914: 473):

*The natural function of the wing is to soar upwards and carry that which is heavy up to the place where dwells the race of gods. More than any other thing that pertains to the body it partakes of the nature of the divine.*

Berefelt (1968: 17) comments on this passage by speculating that this Platonic utterance may have had some influence on later conceptions of angels and their appearances. He therefore writes:

*The classical idea of wings as a symbol of speed, as the attribute of a being occupying an intermediate position between mortals and gods and as a symbol of spirituality lies at the root of the investment of Christian angels with wings.*

H. Rombach (1983: 69) elaborates on the iconography of the angel as a winged beings and maintains that:

*[S]ie sich ohne Aussenstützung halten, also "schweben". Daher die Flügel. Sodann sind sie die "Boten" Gottes, und nur als Boten nehmen sie eine Gestalt an, erscheinen als Jünglinge, Weise, Reisende. Dabei verlassen sie natürlich nicht ihren "Ort", der ihnen als Geistwesen zusteht; sie sind zugleich hier und da, darum Boten.<sup>4</sup>*

Not all Christian artists adhered to the motif of a winged angel. E. Wind (1960: 79), for example, interprets the *ignudi* that Michelangelo painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel as angels and suggests that the artist "seems to have recoiled from the idea of disfiguring a human body with the appurtenances of a fowl".

Historically, in religions other than Christian, the symbolic meaning of wings attached to any figure, or object, signified that it is divine, for example, the winged sun disc in Egyptian art. In Christianity, however, wings do not signify divinity, for no creature or being, however exalted, can equal, or approach, the divine nature of God. Thus, the Christian angel's wings symbolize the ability to move between planes of existence at the behest of God, and also perhaps reveal a closeness to God, in the sense of being members of the celestial "court" of God – an image appropriated from the appurtenances and trappings of the royal courts of the ancient Middle East and Byzantium.

On the material plane, birds have wings that are exteriorised organs for movement through active contact with the air. An anonymous author (1985: 382) points out that there is an essential difference between the functioning of the physical wings of a bird, and the operation of the wings of an angel:

<sup>4</sup> They elevate themselves without external support, they hover. Hence the *wings*. Thus they are "emissaries" of God, and they take shape only as emissaries by appearing as youths, wise men, travellers. And of course they do not leave the domain where they belong as incorporeal spirits; they are both here and there, hence messengers.

*Just as the bird, whose body is solid and liquid, elevates itself by means of wings from the solid and liquid regions into that of the air, so does the Angel elevate itself by means of currents of vital and psychic energy – which correspond to wings – into the spiritual world higher than vital and astral elements.*

Wings, consisting of vital and psychic energy, are surely invisible to the natural eye; and Wilde's statement about Michelangelo's *agnate* may therefore have another dimension to it. However, angels are intermediaries between the divine and the human realms. The anonymous author (1985: 382) referred to above furthermore writes that "the Angel's wings constitute semi-organic links with God", a conclusion which he arrives at as follows:

*The bird flying supports itself on the air in order to overcome terrestrial gravitation. Its flying results from its efforts – it beats the air with its wings – directed against terrestrial gravitation. However, it is the opposite for an Angel. Its "flying" is not a mechanical operation of "sculling the air", as is the case with a bird, but it is a magical operation of the establishing of contact with "celestial gravitation", i.e. with divine attraction. He [i.e. the angel] does not use his wings against terrestrial gravitation, but rather he employs them in order to put himself in contact with "celestial gravitation". It is the touch of divine love that the Angel seeks and finds by means of his wings, and which raises him in ecstasy to a higher sphere.*

*One could thus say in a concise way: the bird flies by beating its wings against the air, by resting on the air; the Angel "flies" by immobilising its wings after having touched God.*

From this extract, one may argue that the representation of angels without wings denies them

their most appropriate iconography because they then assume a merely human form, incapable of the power of free movement into the air, which as L.B. Alberti (1972), the fifteenth-century theorist who wrote a treatise *On painting*, suggested, would be the most graceful kind of movement that could be depicted in art.

One may conclude that a winged human figure might seem a more appropriate representation of an angel who fulfils his destiny in the execution of God's will. According to the Bible, man is a being who was made only "for a little while lower than the angels" (Hebrews 2: 7; see also Psalm 8: 6). Thus a winged human figure might be an appropriate metaphorical image of the angel.

As God's messenger, the angel moves "vertically" between heaven and earth as suggested in various Bible texts (cf Revelations 18: 1), and is the only figure in Western iconography which does so. Thus, it is apt that an earthly metaphor for movement into the heavens, the wing, which enables a bird to fly freely into the sky, should become a metaphorical attribute for an angel. The wing is also an apt symbol in the representation of angels, as A. Venturi (1895: 6) rightly remarks, because angels, "hanno le ali in segno della costante lore mobilità".<sup>5</sup>

This mobility was most probably based on a literal belief in the description of angels in Hebrews

<sup>5</sup> Angels "have wings as a sign of their perpetual mobility".

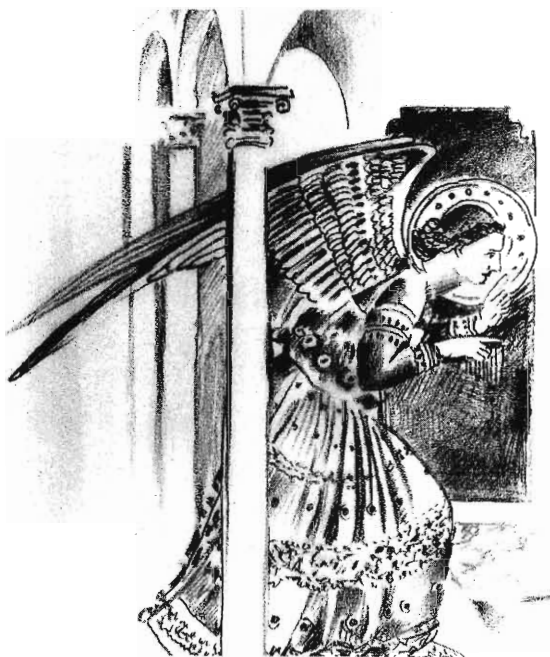


Fig. 18 Fra Angelico, *Annunciation*, 1443. Museo Diocesano, Cortona.

1: 7 as “flame of fire”. This text is also the inspiration of the Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (1976) who designated angels as “fiery”.

### Angels as kernels of movement and meaning in Italian Renaissance and Baroque art

The representation of angels as ascending and descending winged beings reached a climax in Italian art of the High Renaissance and Baroque. By the fifteenth century, the iconographic tradition of angels as winged beings was well established in the art of religious painters such as Fra Angelico. His angels are usually represented as youthful, androgynous and winged beings, as for example, in his depictions of the Annunciation (fig. 18). Leonardo da Vinci, too, developed the theme of the angel fulfilling the task of the divine messenger, especially in his *Annunciation*, in which the angel is represented as kneeling, as

in Fra Angelico’s *Annunciation*. In Leonardo’s representation of the kneeling angel, his messenger’s staff is in the form of a long-stemmed white lily, the attribute of the Virgin, which signified purity, but which is also reminiscent of the staff that Hermes or Mercury bears. More important is the psychological development of Quattrocento figures, which G. Duwe (1988: 37) identifies:

*[E]in völlig neues Kriterium erschien in der divina conversatio, es war die Bedeutsamkeit des Psychisch-Individuellen, das den heiligen Vorgang zunehmend bestimmte. Die Gestalten wurden in ihrer Begegnung von Gefühlen und Empfindungen geprägt, menschlich durch Bewegungen und Gesten, sie zeigten eine immer breiter werdenden Skala psychischer Regungen.<sup>6</sup>*

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The figures of angels in the works by Fra Angelico and Leonardo, mentioned above, reveal themselves through “Ausdrucksbewegung”,<sup>7</sup> which as G. Paulsson (1967: 133) explains, occurs in the inner being of a represented person, without influencing the surrounding space.

During the sixteenth century, angels featured in the oeuvres of many acclaimed Northern European and Italian painters. Especially in Italy the influence of Roman prototypes remained remarkably vital. Therefore, E. Panofsky (1969: 29) remarks that the angel Gabriel “seems to have borrowed his garments from a classical Victory

<sup>6</sup> A completely new criterion appeared in the *divina conversatio*, namely the significance of the psychic-individual which increasingly determined the sacred event. The figures’ encounter was dominated by feelings and experiences. Their movements and gestures were human, they displayed awareness of an ever widening range of psychic stimuli.

<sup>7</sup> Expressive movement.

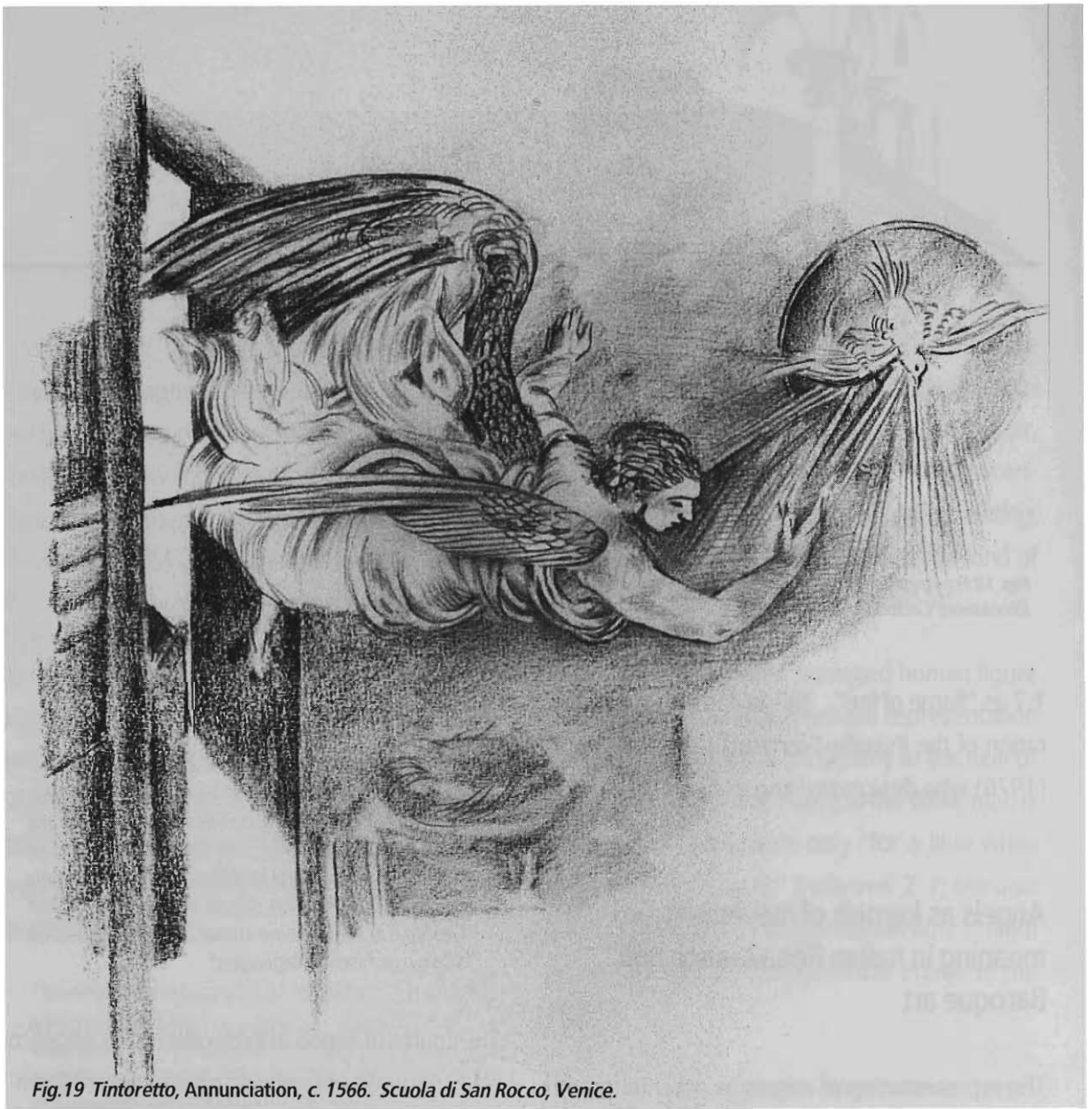


Fig. 19 Tintoretto, *Annunciation*, c. 1566. Scuola di San Rocco, Venice.

and his boots from a classical Mercury". More important than the mere attributes of the angel that Panofsky refers to is the synthesis of the human and the real with the mystical and the unreal in the encounter between Gabriel and Mary in Renaissance art. Duwe (1988: 38) concurs with this observation by referring to "eine Synthese zwischen dem Menschlich-Realen und dem Mystisch-Irrealen".<sup>8</sup>

In Tintoretto's *Annunciation* (fig. 19), the angel visiting the Virgin is represented in a horizontal

position in full flight. G. Schiller (1972: 52) writes: "As in many late images [by Tintoretto], Gabriel is shown flying. The clouds and angels which follow him seem to dissolve the frontiers between heaven and earth." This is artistically a most complex image in which space, light and gesture contribute to the encounter between the terrestrial and celestial. The movement of this angel represents a "Zielhandlung" in Paulsson's (1967: 133) terminology. Such a gesture is directed towards a purpose, it is a "zielbezogenen Situation", in which "es nicht nur Richtungen gibt,

<sup>8</sup> A synthesis between human reality and mystical unreality.

<sup>9</sup> A goal-oriented situation in which there are not only directions, but a goal determined by distance, and space as a whole ordered by this principle.

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sondern auch ein Ziel, das nach Lange und Abstand bestimmt wird, wodurch sich der ganze Raum ordnet".<sup>9</sup>

Notwithstanding the Albertian artist's ideal to portray what is real, angels never disappeared from Renaissance and Baroque art. They were used to bond the terrestrial and celestial in *historia* paintings which were based on biblical texts, especially those referring to the life of Christ and/or the Virgin, and the presence of angels. At the time, however, angelology received very little attention, as S. Schneiderman (1988: 3) succinctly points out:

*A more or less constant preoccupation of philosophers and theologians throughout the Middle Ages, the holy angels were one of the casualties of the Renaissance, this despite the fact that their memory lived on immortalized in art.*

The reason for the continued popularity of angels in sixteenth-century art, and in El Greco's oeuvre in particular, is open to speculation. One may assume that angels afforded artists the opportunity to portray idealized (though human) figures in highly imaginative scenes in which reality nevertheless had to be convincingly portrayed. Duwe (1988: 141-2) concludes that, during the Quattrocento, the figure of the angel Gabriel – and one may gather of other angels as well – was not adapted to the naturalistic manner of representation and remained in an unreal



Fig.20 El Greco, Annunciation, c. 1470-75. Contini-Bonacossi Collection. Florence.

sphere, barely touched by the Renaissance consciousness:

*Der Prozess der Säkularisierung und das gewonnene Selbstverständnis des Individuums fanden in der Gestalt des Engels nicht den adäquaten Vorwurf der Selbstdarstellung eines neu gewonnenen Menschenbildes.<sup>10</sup>*

El Greco's depiction of angels represents a continuation of the Christian iconographical tradition of the angel. However, he developed a personal style of figural expression, and his depictions of angelic figures are especially innovative. He succeeded in developing the theme of angels in an original manner by transforming them from "hovering" beings into beings capable of strong, forceful movement (fig. 20). Aspiring movement in a painting had already been Alberti's aesthetic ideal, an ideal fully realised during the sixteenth century by means of the continuous *figura serpentinata*, or vortex, through which a figure could actually be "directed upward into the air". The *figura serpentinata* motif, which related to the flight and self-activating force of angels, oc-

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<sup>10</sup> The process of secularisation and the newly acquired status of the individual did not find an adequate vehicle through which a new-found perception of humankind could express itself.



cupied with various missions or tasks, was frequently depicted by El Greco.

In the late sixteenth century, El Greco had the opportunity of combining the symbolism of angels, as developed by theologians, with the pictorial qualities which he mastered in Italy, in a mystical concept. In his works he turned the angel into a pictorial metaphor which functioned on various levels. The prototypical Christian hovering angel he turned into a gesturing angel in which the ideals of Classical rhetoric can initially be recognized. Thus the angel as the messenger becomes the embodiment of revelation and illumination to the beholder. For expressing movement, El Greco invented a range of spiral forms suggesting energy, power and kinetic movement, but in his angels as a motif one may recognize the grace which they convey, not only in terms of physical elegance, but also as a quality of devotion which they invite the beholder to contemplate and share in, as do some of his

Fig. 21 Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Angel decorating the baldacchino in St. Peter's, Rome, 1663-6.*



human figures. The angels, who incorporate natural qualities on a basic level of pictorial representation, are turned into symbols of transcendence by El Greco. Thus, on various levels, his angels become pictorial metaphors.

In a final example from the Baroque, an artist like Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680) succeeded in suggesting the fiery quality of angels even in bronze. Most renowned are the sculptures of angels which crown the baldacchino in St Peter's in Rome (fig. 21). V. H. Minor (1989) describes these as "fiery" angels and proves that even in the seventeenth century Pseudo-Dionysius' work on the angelic hierarchy was still the standard text from which artists gained their knowledge about angels.

## Part II: The angelic hierarchy

In Gnostic and Neoplatonic systems, angels became a significant part of Christian dogma even though, under Jewish-Chaldean influence, they were still connected with the planets (cf Walker 1958). When the early Christian theologians described the hierarchy of beings which existed between God and man, they distinguished various categories or "choirs" of angels. In the fifth or sixth centuries of the Christian era, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (1976), who pretended to be the Athenian convert of St. Paul, explained this in his *Hierarchia celestis*, which left a significant imprint on the development of Christian

doctrine. In this work, which was probably influenced by the vision in 2 Corinthians 12: 2-4 – in which St. Paul was carried up into the third heaven – the author classifies the celestial beings into three hierarchies, in descending order:

- 1 Seraphim  
Cherubim  
Thrones
- 2 Dominations  
Virtues  
Powers
- 3 Princedoms or Principalities  
Archangels  
Angels

Pseudo-Dionysius also explained the connecting links between spirits, and considers the spirit world to be one great harmonious universe. This concept was not drawn from Scripture, but was inspired by Neoplatonic philosophy. Celestial spirits were in contact with God but were, nevertheless, separate from God. Fellow spirits of higher spiritual rank could elevate those of lower rank by relationships, which was the purpose of *illuminatio angelica*. Every angel had a dual relationship, one with God, and one with a person. Therefore angels treated people as related spirits (Vonier 1939: 260).

Apart from St. Paul's vision, there is no infallible

biblical evidence for the assumption that nine choirs of angels actually exist (Maré 1995: 158). Nevertheless, Pope Gregory the Great (330-395) accepted such a gradation. Also, St. Thomas Aquinas (1945: 480) wrote extensively on the hierarchical distinctions. At first sight it seems as though he merely appropriated Pseudo-Dionysius's system, but he formulated an original vision of the existence of angels. According to Aquinas, angels were divided into nine orders called "choirs", but every angel was in himself a complete angelic order (*ordo*). Every angel was a new species, a world unto himself, holding a place of singular importance in the angelic world, being indispensable to the completeness of the universe. Once again, he postulated that lesser angels receive and follow the will of higher angels. He concluded: "Thus, in order that the universe be perfect, it is necessary that there be some incorporeal creature" (Aquinas 1945: 493-4). After Aquinas, his concept became firmly based in Christian belief.

Thus, one may concur with the rule laid down by William of Ockham (1285-1349), which J.M. Adler (1982: 56) points out has been followed ever since by cautious scientists and philosophers, namely that: "The only justification for affirming the existence of something unperceived and, perhaps, imperceptible is that whatever it is that needs to be explained cannot be explained in any other way." Therefore, in Christian theology, angelology became an accepted field of

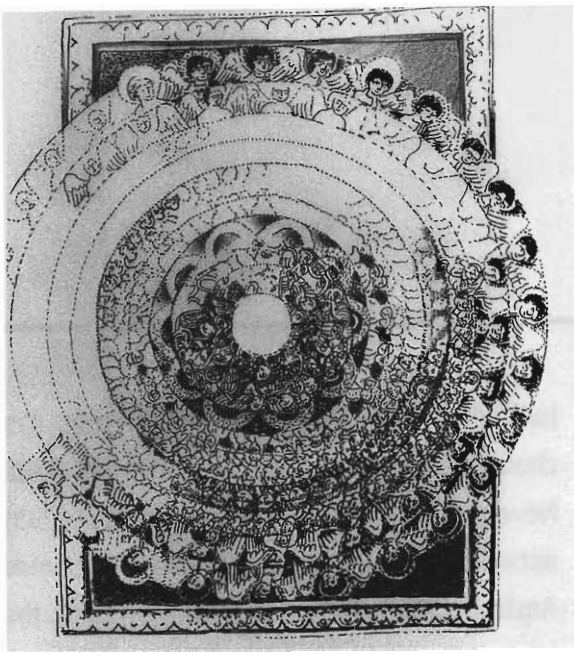


Fig.22 Angelic hierarchy as represented by Hildegard von Bingen. Miniature from *The Breviary of St Hildegard*, 1141-51.

study and the ideas of theologians were echoed in the iconography of Christian art. Representations of the angelic hierarchy most often show nine choirs of angels arranged in concentric circles (fig. 22).

22

Neoplatonic philosophers believed in an extended hierarchy of being. At the pinnacle was the One, the Godhead. From the One proceed the three degrees of "emanation" that formed the three worlds of the cosmos. In the terminology of G. Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) (1572: 15) the first hypostasis, mind or spirit, becomes the angelic or intellectual world, which exists by participation in the first being. The heavenly hierarchy governs and cares for the celestial and sublunar worlds. The first of these is incorruptible, but inferior to the "intelligible" world, or *mundus intelligibilis*, which was a creation of antiquity, especially Platonic thought. In Patristic thought (St. Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, and others) it was Christianised in the sense that angels who were derived from biblical sources replaced the celestial planetary gods and deities.

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The intelligible world, then, was continually in movement and it was a world of mingled light and darkness (Pico della Mirandola 1572: 5). It was divided into nine spheres, or heavens, each ruled by one of the nine angelic orders, and its two great operations were movement and illumination.

Thus, medieval theologians, and Dante, accepted "the existence of nine harmoniously moving, translucent celestial spheres which form the geometry of Heaven" (Pekonen 1993: 22). The Finnish mathematician O. Pekonen (1993: 22) points out that:

*[Medieval] astronomers did their best to reconcile the prescribed ninefold structure with observations. Beyond the well-established spheres of the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, they posited ad hoc the Firmament and the Crystalline sphere.*

*The ultimate tenth sphere was to be above the nine mobile ones.*

Medieval theologians reached agreement only on one detail of the spherical geometry of heaven, namely on "the strange numerical fact that there should exist 1 + 9 celestial spheres" (Pekonen 1993: 22). This, Pekonen points out, has a parallel in modern "superstring theory" which postulates 1 + 9 space time dimensions (Witten 1987), which is reminiscent of artistic representations showing nine concentric circles containing either a void in the centre or the figure of Christ.

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## Conclusion

The Reformation, as Woodward (1982: 286) points out, broke through the mediated system of salvation: *"The heavenly world was denuded to emphasize the majesty of the transcendent God..."* Or, in the words of Berger (1973: 118): *"A sky empty of angels becomes open to the intervention of the astronomer and eventually the astronaut."*

The reasons why artists after the nineteenth century seldom depicted angels or winged beings, except perhaps when referring to traditional iconography, for example in an Annunciation scene, is easily explained. The expansion of scientific thought during the Industrial Revolution and the influence of the Enlightenment gave rise to a materialist culture and the substitution of physics for metaphysics. Therefore, speculation about a heavenly world was abandoned. In this respect the artist Gustave Courbet (1819-77) made the memorable statement: "I have never seen angels. Show me an angel and I will paint one" (Chilvers *et al* 1994: 158-9). Furthermore, modern technology endowed the human race with the power of flight. The invention of the aeroplane erased speculation about the mystery of flight and vertical movement from the human mind.

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