CHAPTER THREE

EARLY CHRISTIAN AND MEDIEVAL CONCEPTS OF TIME

Many of the speculations and theories of time set forth in medieval theological literature had no direct expression in the visual arts. The following chapter does not presume to present a comprehensive philosophical review but briefly points to some major theoretical sources in an attempt to demonstrate dialectical issues of time relevant to the imagery, or lack of it, in early Christian art.

The Negation of Time in Early Christian Art

The appropriation and assimilation of non-Christian symbols into Christian contexts during the first centuries of our era has been widely demonstrated and analyzed in the literature. During the same period, however, there is a conspicuous gap in the depiction of time, a seeming denial of the concretization of time that raises fundamental questions. How can we explain the disappearance of time symbols and personifications that were so prominent in classical art? Ecclesiasts pursued the questions of time and temporality, in theological, historical, eschatological and millenarian contexts, and dealt with time-calculation, primarily from the seventh and eight centuries to establish church feasts (especially Easter), yet there were few artistic depictions of time or visual expressions of temporal duration in art during the first centuries of the Christian era.1

This question arose in regard to Karl Lehmann’s influential article “The Dome of Heaven”, in which he undertook to demonstrate that the theme of the Christian dome was derived from pre-Christian pagan types and

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retained the cosmological content of Roman vault decoration. Thomas Mathews, in his refutation of this theory, has shown that the sanctuary vault in San Vitale, Ravenna (6th c.), as the closest Early Christian parallel, does not reproduce the temporal imagery of Roman precedents. In the center the lamb within a wreath, supported by four angels, replaces the sun god. He notes: “entirely missing from the program are the sun and the planets, the Hours, the astral divinities and the signs of the zodiac. The omissions turn out to be more important than the four supporting figures, which are of minor consequence in later medieval dome decoration”. The fact that the planets and signs of the zodiac were excluded in early Christian imagery has been related to the refutation of astrology and astral fatalism. Bianca Kühnel has attributed the lack of temporal symbols to the identification between time and empire, and “the use of time in the Roman cult of state that at first caused Christians to stay away from any attempt to concretize time”. She stressed that the aversion to dealings with the calculation of time was aroused by suspicion of pagan astrology. Although the Judeo-Christian apocalypse was anticipated at the end of the seventh millennium, mathematical calculations to determine the end of the world were not undertaken by either religious group. Such projections into the future involved measurements of time that were, in any case, beyond their capacities. But what was significant, as Lactantius already proclaimed in his *Divinae Institutiones* (303–11 A.D.), was that following the universal *ekpyrosis*, there would be “a new world, which would not be subject to astral influences and freed from dominion of time”.

The re-cycling of the *cosmocrator* imagery, appropriated both from early Byzantine Jewish mosaics in Palestine (4th–6th c.) and Roman imperial iconography, for the early image of Christ, did include several symbols of eternal time. From approximately the sixth century, depictions of the busts or signs of *Sol* and *Luna* and/or the letters *Alpha* and 

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4 The conception of the stars as “signs” in Christian cosmology and their later depictions in monumental art is discussed in my chapter on the Romanesque zodiac.
7 Kühnel (as in note 5), 45–48, 60–62; Regarding the appropriation of imperial imagery, see the classical work by André Grabar, *Christian Iconography, A Study of its Origins,*