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978-1-107-03705-2 - The Mystic ARK: Hugh of Saint Victor, Art, and Thought in the Twelfth Century

Conrad Rudolph

Excerpt

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ONE

THE MYSTIC ARK LECTURES

INTRODUCTION

Very rarely, if at all, has a detailed account of the actual moment of conception of a great work of art come down to us from the Middle Ages. But it is with precisely such an account that Hugh of Saint Victor begins *The Moral Ark* (1125–1130), a treatise that forms an important part of the *Ark* texts. He writes:

One day, when I was sitting in discussion with the brethren, with them asking questions and me responding, many things were brought up for consideration. After a while, the conversation came around to a point that, all together, we began to express a kind of astonishment at the inconstancy and restlessness of the human heart, and to sigh over it. And then, with great desire indeed, they asked that they be shown what it was that brought about such wild fluctuations of thought in the human heart, and repeatedly and urgently demanded that they be taught, if it were possible, to counter such a great evil as this through some skill or by the practice of some discipline.

Wishing to satisfy the charity of the brethren on both accounts, under God's inspiration we untied the knot of each question as much as we were able by offering arguments based on authority as well as on reason.

Now, because I know that, in this discussion, certain points in particular pleased the brethren, I especially wanted to commit them to



1. *The Mystic Ark*. Original 1125 to early 1130. Shown as it might have appeared if constructed at the convent of Hohenbourg during the abbacy of Abbess Herrad in the late twelfth century. The construction here has a height of 3.632 meters (11 feet, 11 inches) and width of 4.623 meters (15 feet, 2 inches). Digital construction. *Source*: Clement/Bahmer/Rivas/Bozhilova/Rudolph.

writing – not so much because I thought they were worth recording but because I knew that some of them were previously unheard of in this context and were, so to speak, all the better received because of it.¹

Written as a result of an unusually positive reaction to the *Mystic Ark* lectures, this evocative passage presents the charge of those lectures, a subject that will be taken up more fully later. For now, it is enough to say that this charge was nothing less than to deliver an analysis of the cause of the inability of humankind to remain in the presence of God through contemplation and to provide a means for overcoming this failing. Hugh's response to both of these demands was the *Ark* lectures, a series of lectures and discussions of incredibly original conception and amazing comprehensiveness and unity of thought by previous medieval standards. And the primary vehicle for this ambitious undertaking – the focal point, generally speaking, of the lectures – was a painting, the painting of *The Mystic Ark* (Fig. 1, Color Fig. 1).

The text of *The Mystic Ark* describes an image so astonishingly complex that it would be impossible to give a description of it that both is complete and will not try the reader's patience. In fact, a complete description of the image of *The Mystic Ark* would amount to only a little less than a repetition of the entire text of *The Mystic Ark*, which itself is, at times, somewhat abbreviated. But let me sketch at least the main components of the *Ark* from the text and leave the details and the significance for later.

The Ark of *The Mystic Ark* is a schematic depiction of the Ark of the Flood based on a cubit module but with the original dimensions from Genesis 6:15 altered (Fig. 2 A and B). Although depicted "two-dimensionally" (*plano*, in this case, in the manner of a floor plan), it is meant to be understood three-dimensionally, according to the text of *The Mystic Ark* (cf. Fig. 3). The Ark has three "stages" (decks, stories), these stages being stepped and progressively smaller the higher they are (Fig. 4). All the stages are meant to be colored, but a (symbolic) color is specified only for the top stage, and this is purple (Fig. 5, Color Fig. 8). The top stage is also the only stage that has a roof, this roof being pitched and culminating in a single cubit, in which the Lamb of God is depicted standing (Fig. 6, Color Fig. 10). This central cubit, as it is called, is interwoven with a rather involved composition of symbols, symbolic colors, and inscriptions. Both compositionally and conceptually, the entire image of *The Mystic Ark* is centered on the central cubit (Fig. 7, no. 1; Fig. 8).

The Ark is fixed in a traditional macrocosm/microcosm consisting of the three zones of earth, air, and ether (Fig. 9). The earth, with which the Ark is coterminous, is given as a world map in the form of an ellipsoid (*vesica piscis*) with "regions, mountains, rivers, cities, and towns" (Fig. 10, no. 9; Fig. 11, Color Fig. 6). Its basic color is specified as green, and it is oriented with the east at the top. The air contains a quaternary harmony with the ages of a human being, the four elements, the seasons, the cardinal directions, and the four qualities, all surrounded by the twelve winds (Fig. 12). And the ether includes the Twelve Months and the Signs of the Zodiac, with the circumference marked off into 360 degrees. A Majesty embraces this cosmos, sitting enthroned and holding a scroll in his right hand and a scepter in his left. With the scroll, he welcomes the saved while, with the scepter, he condemns the damned, both of these objects being directed toward specific parts of the world. On either side of the Majesty stand two seraphim with wings in a complex, symbolic arrangement. On either side of his head, the nine choirs of angels are arranged in a radically smaller scale, gazing upon his face (Fig. 13, Color Fig. 2).

The six days of creation are depicted as if coming from the mouth of the Majesty, with the sixth day (the creation of humankind) touching the Ark (Fig. 14; Fig. 15, Color Fig. 3). The eastern tip of the ellipsoid of the world is described as "Paradise as the Bosom of Abraham," while the western tip

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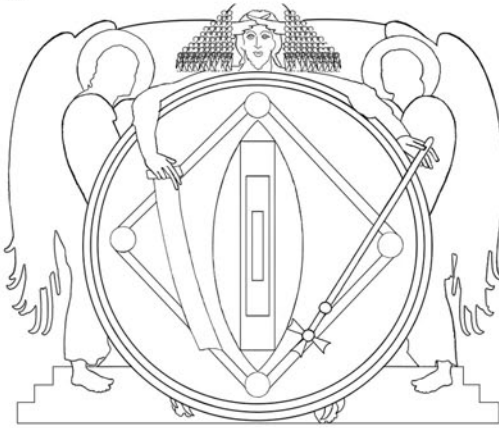
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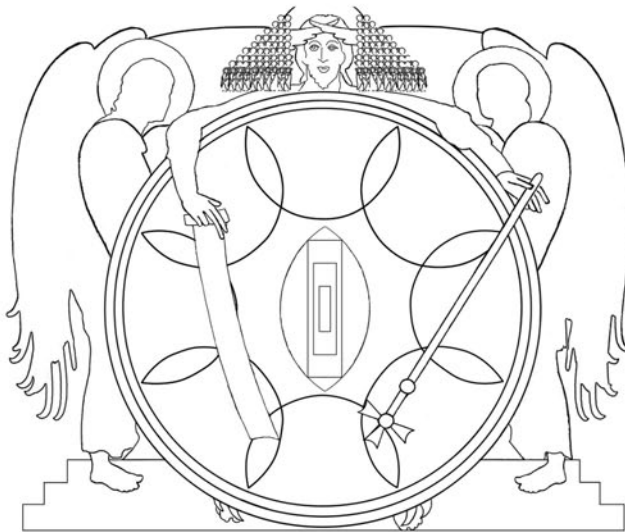
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A

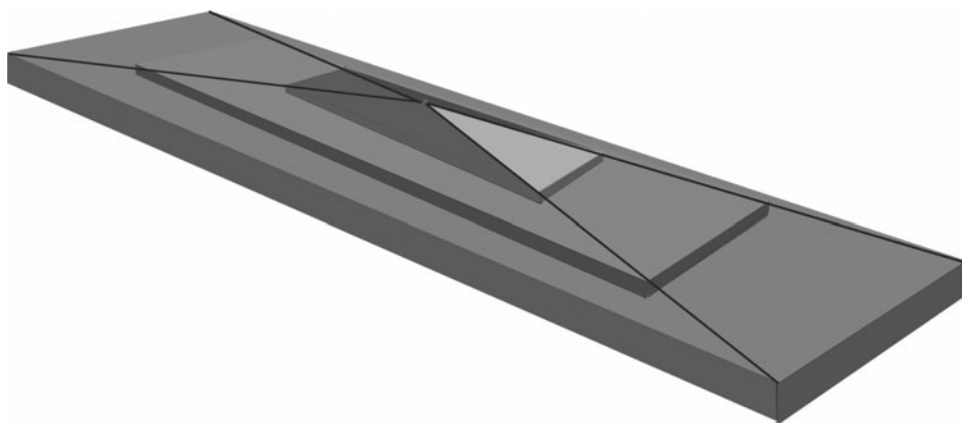


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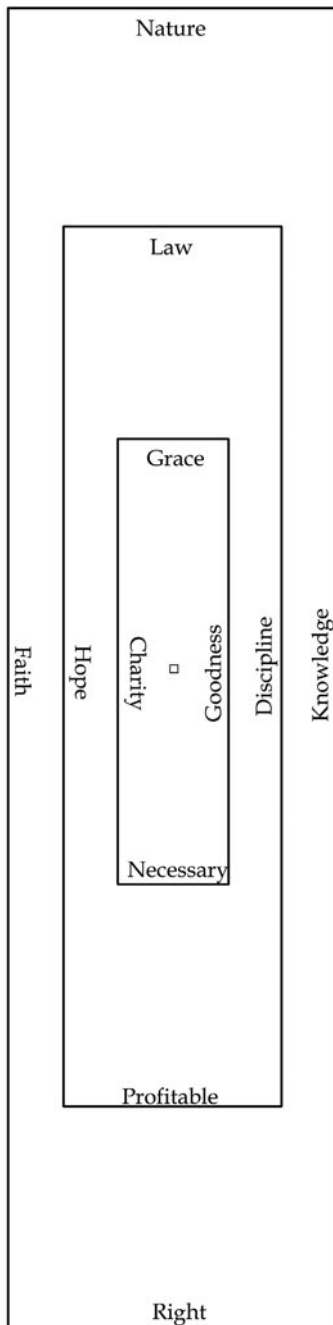
2. *The Mystic Ark*, diagram. Relative proportions of different potential *Mystic Ark* compositions. (A) The relative size of *The Mystic Ark* if made according to the reduced proportions recommended in the text of *The Mystic Ark* (Ark proper, 200 x 50 cubits). These proportions allow the image to fit onto the wall of a cloister – the traditional place of learning in a monastery – the size of Saint-Trophime in Arles (cf. Fig. 37). (B) The relative size of *The Mystic Ark* if made according to the unaltered biblical proportions of Genesis 6:15, which results in an image too large for a contemporary cloister wall (Ark proper, 300 x 50 cubits). (C) The relative size of *The Mystic Ark* if made according to the recommended reduced proportions but employing a classic circular macro/microcosmic harmony such as Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms lat. 5543:136 (Fig. 55). Source: Clement/Bahmer/Rivas/Bozhilova/Rudolph.



3. Three-dimensional reconstruction of the three-stage Ark proper from Hugh of Saint Victor's two-dimensional painting of *The Mystic Ark* as described in the text of *The Mystic Ark*. Source: Bahmer/Rudolph.

contains the Last Judgment, with certain details specified (Fig. 7, nos 4 and 11; Fig. 16, Color Fig. 5; Fig. 17, Color Fig. 12). In between, a one-cubit-wide “line of generation” stretches from one end of the Ark to the other. At that point where the Ark is touched by the sixth day of creation, Hugh places an Adam macro/microcosm, probably identical in size to the central cubit (Fig. 18, Color Fig. 4). From this proceeds the line of generation “according to the flesh” (the genealogy of Christ), extending from the Adam macro/microcosm to the central cubit, which is Christ (Fig. 14). Individual “icons” (*iconias*, bust portraits in roundels) of the twelve Patriarchs extend across the width of the Ark immediately after the name of Jacob (Fig. 19, Color Fig. 9). From the central cubit, the line of generation “according to the spirit” (the spiritual descendants of Christ in the form of a list of the popes) continues this progression but breaks off before the western end of the Ark in order to indicate “those who are to come after us.” “Icons” of the twelve Apostles spread across the Ark immediately after the central cubit, at the place of Peter's name in the list of popes (Fig. 20, Color Fig. 11). Along the length of the line of generation are listed the six ages of the history of salvation (Fig. 21, Color Fig. 7).

Down each side of the Ark extends a complex sequence of “planks” representing the three periods of natural law, the written law, and grace. Meaning is given to these through their positioning, relative width, and symbolic color (green, yellow, and purple). Two of these colors, purple and green, bear a direct relation to the purple of the third stage and the green of the world map, respectively. A “V” shaped pair of “planks” run from the eastern corners of the Ark up to the central cubit, one plank representing the people of the Jews (coming from Mount Zion) and the other the people of the Gentiles (approaching from “the sides of the north”), both specifically “in both sexes” (Fig. 22).

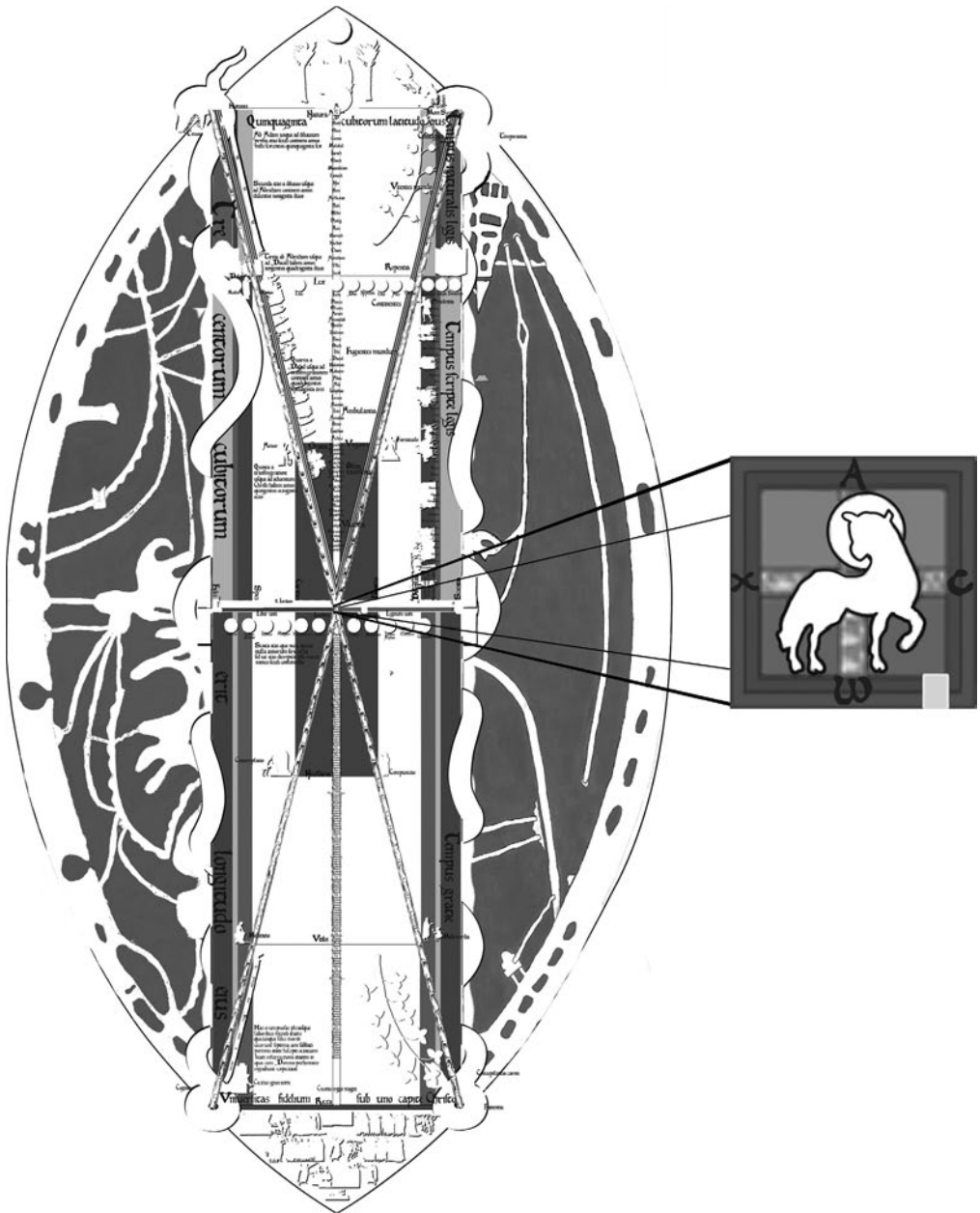


4. *The Mystic Ark*, diagram. The three stages. Source: Clement/Bahmer/Rivas/Rudolph.

Along the western end of the Ark, a pair of planks runs from side to side, referring to the eventual unity of both peoples (in both sexes) in the community of the faithful under one head, Christ. Inscriptions accompany all of these components.

On the world map, the Chosen People enter the Ark from Egypt at a gate in the south side and journey down the length of the Ark, with the forty-two stages or stopping places of their forty years wandering inscribed along the route (Fig. 23, Color Fig. 25). At the River Jordan, which stretches across the Ark just east of the central cubit, they approach the Promised Land and Jerusalem (the central cubit, which primarily represents Christ). On the north side of the Ark, from the name of Jehoiachin (king of Judah at the time of the exile to Babylon) on the line of generation, the Jews are dragged off to captivity in Babylon, indicated on the world map, which they approach through a gate in the Ark opposite that through which they entered from Egypt (Fig. 24, Color Fig. 13).

The central cubit is understood as the top of a pillar (which I call the central pillar), a vertical pillar whose two sides are nevertheless depicted as if horizontally bisecting the Ark (Color Fig. 11; cf. Fig. 25). These two sides refer to the Tree of Life (the south side) and the Book of Life (the north side), expressions of the dual nature of Christ. The pillar is symbolically colored and has doors at the base of each side, through which Noah and other figures “go out” (Fig. 26, Fig. 27). Toward the top of the southern side of the pillar is a window, from which the raven and dove of the story of Noah also “go out” (Fig. 28, Color Fig. 20). Two branches spread down from the Tree of Life, while two scrolls extend from the Book of Life, each with a different role to play as indicated by distinguishing imagery or text. The Ark is surrounded by the biblical flood, and at particular places around the outside of the Ark are six “lesser stages,” rafts that are fixed to the side of the Ark for amphibious creatures and that refer to the cities of refuge of the Old Testament (Fig. 7, no. 13). A serpent encircles the entire Ark, wrapping itself around each of the four corners of the Ark, from which four “ascents” rise up past the three stages, rising to the Lamb of God in the central cubit at the top of the central pillar (Fig. 29).



5. *The Mystic Ark*, diagrammatic detail. The Ark proper, with only those colors mentioned in the text, with the central cubit set out as an enlargement for clarity. (*The Moral Ark* notes that the sixty men and sixty women were dressed in garments of red, white, and violet. I have not depicted this because I do not believe that these colors were meant exclusively.) See Color Fig. 8. *Source*: Clement/Bahmer/Rivas/Rudolph.

The three stages and, especially, the four ascents are far too complex to even list their individual components here. So I will only say that each face of the three stages carries a triad of highly significant terms (for a total of twelve). Similarly, each ascent carries a triad of “virtues” (for a total of twelve),



6. *The Mystic Ark*, detail. The central cubit (enlarged for greater clarity; for the central cubit to scale, see Fig. 75). Source: Clement/Bahmer/Rivas/Bozhilova/Rudolph.

with three ascents rising up from vices and the fourth rising up from a virtue. Each of these three vices has its own personification or, in one case, figural symbol. Each ascent is composed of three ladders that correspond to the three stages (Fig. 30). A different virtue and accompanying figural personification are associated with each ladder, some of these personifications being fairly involved (Fig. 31; Color Fig. 13; Fig. 32, Color Fig. 17; Fig. 33, Color Fig. 21; Color Fig. 25). And one ascent has an additional three triads connected with it – thus adding three more qualities to each ladder of that ascent (nine in addition to the original three) (Fig. 34).

Each ladder has two legs, with a complex of inscriptions and symbolic color segments running the length of the ladder (Fig. 35). Typically, these have individual ladder inscriptions on the inside of each ladder and an ascent-long inscription of some kind on the

outside (including two lists of every book of the Bible). Likewise, the symbolic color segments have individual (though related) themes on the inside legs and a unified theme (though sometimes expressed ladder by ladder) on the outside. Each of the ladders is marked off into ten steps. And on each one of these steps, in alternating sequence, the sixty mighty men and sixty queens of the Song of Songs climb toward the central cubit, toward the Lamb of God (Fig. 29).

What is more, there are actually four different Arks that are to be read in this single image – each with its own relatively comprehensive understanding, and each approaching the image of *The Mystic Ark* in a completely different manner: the Ark of Noah, the Ark of the Church, the Ark of Wisdom, and the Ark of Mother Grace.

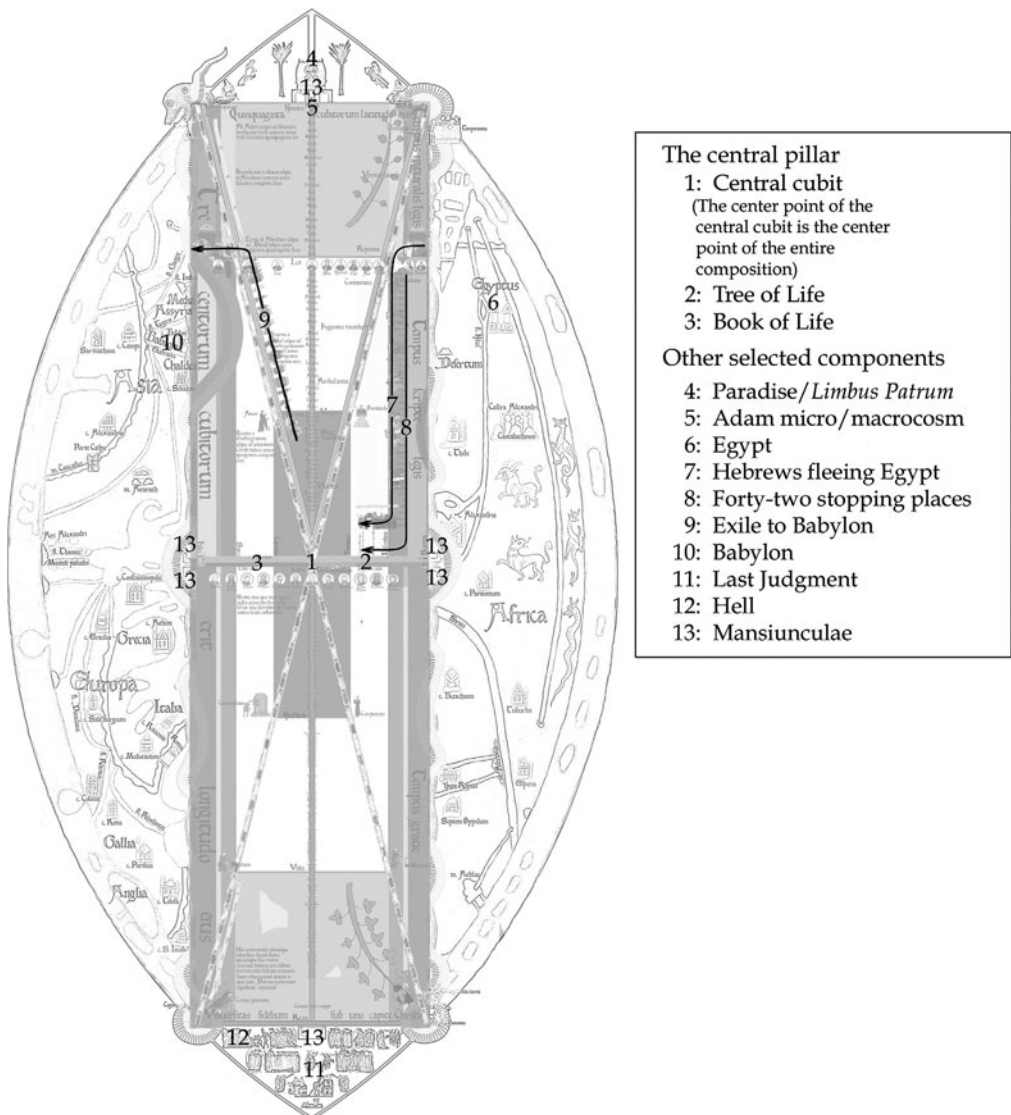
The image of *The Mystic Ark* can certainly be overwhelming. This impression is one that is compounded for the modern scholar by the potentially confusing relation of the different *Ark* texts to one another and to the original image. This relation has never been seriously studied by previous authors except Patrice Sicard, whose conclusions, unfortunately, are based upon an incorrect premise. Both the previous scholarship and Sicard's view of *The Mystic Ark* have been fundamentally shaped by the failure to come to terms with *The Mystic Ark* as a text before trying to analyze the function of that text. By this, I mean the failure to recognize the text of *The Mystic Ark* as a *reportatio*. (A *reportatio* is a medieval

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7. *The Mystic Ark*, diagram. Selected components of the Ark proper and the earth.
Source: Clement/Rivas/Rudolph.

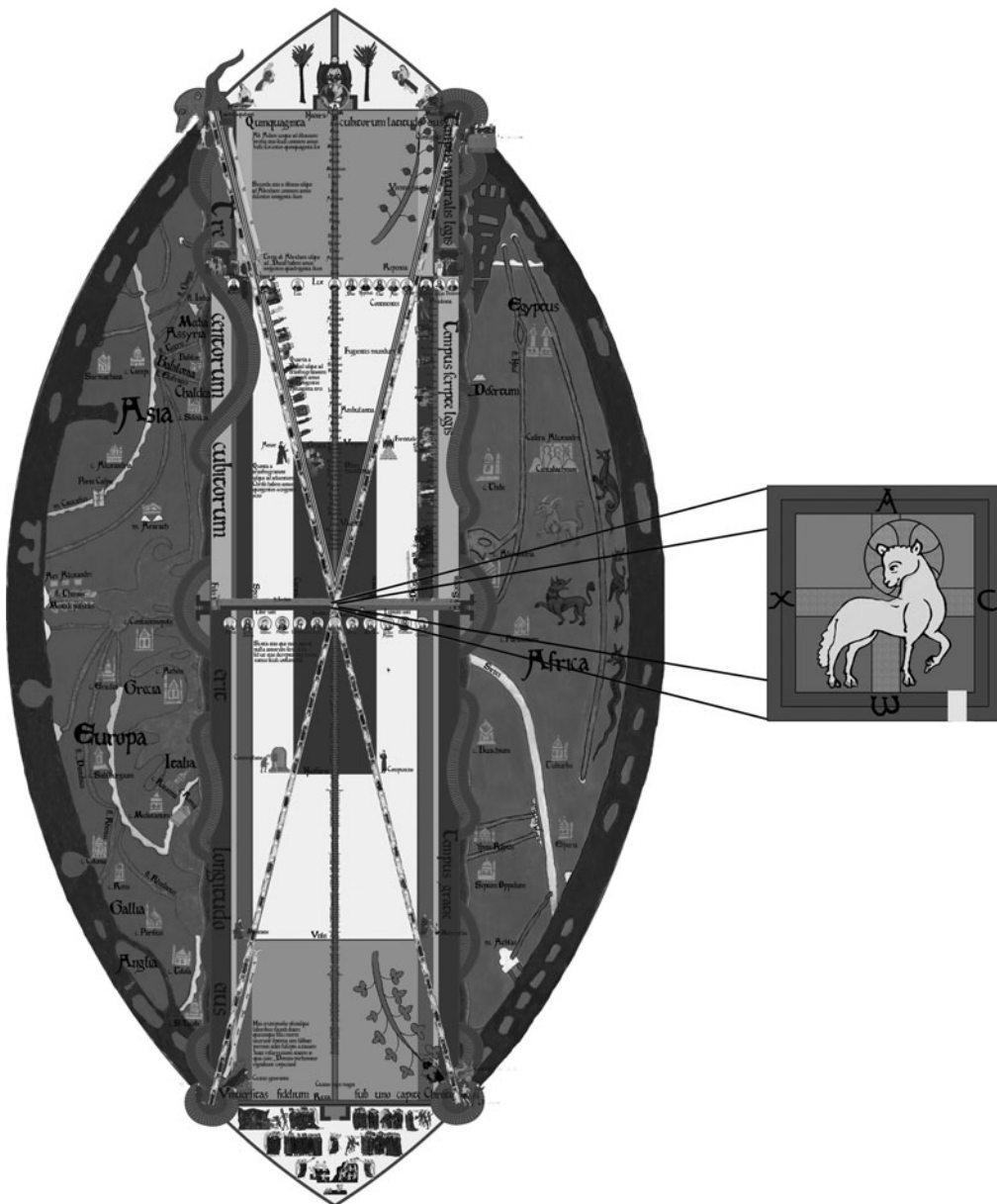
literary form somewhat similar to a student's class notes of a teacher's lecture but worked into a fuller state than class notes, sometimes in the first person, and usually for the use of others.) By the very nature of its being a *reportatio*, Hugh himself is indisputably the moral author of *The Mystic Ark*, even if the text, properly speaking, was put onto parchment by one of his students. But an absence of awareness of the *reportatio* nature of the text of *The Mystic Ark* has led, naturally enough, to a wide variety of misconceptions about its function, as well as about its relation to the other *Ark* texts and to the image itself. However, once the *reportatio* nature of *The Mystic Ark* is recognized, this confusion vanishes.

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8. *The Mystic Ark*, diagrammatic detail. The world, with the central cubit set out as an enlargement to show its place and scale. Source: Clement/Bahmer/Rivas/Rudolph.

Without repeating the detailed arguments of the short book I have written on the previous literature and *The Mystic Ark* as a text within the broader context of the *Ark* lectures, let me just summarize a few of my main conclusions from that study here while adding a few additional points.²

Neither the text nor the image of *The Mystic Ark* should any longer be thought of as an “illustration” of *The Moral Ark*. Similarly, *The Moral Ark* is